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From the Los Angeles Times

To go green, live closer to work, report says

New study says planning compact, mixed-use communities instead of suburbs would help save the planet.

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Don't want to fork out for a Prius? Can't see tanking up with ethanol? Can't afford solar panels for your roof?

Not to worry, you can still do something to fight global warming: Live closer to work.

That's one conclusion of a major national report published Thursday by the nonprofit Urban Land Institute.

Forty percent of the planet-heating gases that Californians emit come from transportation, according to the report's authors, and with its booming population and sprawling suburbs, the state's greenhouse emissions will continue to soar unless it dramatically changes the way it builds cities and suburbs.

The report, "Growing Cooler: Evidence on Urban Development and Climate Change," analyzed scores of academic studies and concluded that compact development -- mixing housing and businesses in denser patterns, with walkable neighborhoods -- could do as much to lower emissions as many of the climate policies now promoted by state and national politicians.

Up to now, climate policy has primarily focused on such things as higher fuel economy for cars and trucks, cleaner fuels, greener building standards, lower power plant emissions, and international treaties. But a growing consensus of experts is also homing in on the everyday zoning decisions of local officials and county planners.

Since 1980, the number of miles Americans drive has risen three times faster than the population and almost twice as fast as vehicle registrations. And it is getting worse: The U.S. Department of Energy projects that between 2005 and 2030, driving will increase 59%, far outpacing an estimated national population growth of 23%.

"We can no longer afford to ignore land use," said Steve Winkelman, director of the Transportation Program at the Center for Clean Air Policy, and one of the report's authors. "Urban development is both a key contributor to climate change and an essential factor in combating it."

The world's top climate scientists agree that human activity is largely driving the heating of the planet, with potentially catastrophic consequences, including a rise in sea levels, spreading deserts, widespread species extinction and severe weather. International and national policy experts say that limiting the global temperature increase to 2 degrees Celsius would require cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 60 to 80% below 1990 levels by mid-century.

Such reductions would require politically difficult measures.

In the case of land use, decisions are made at the local level, so any interference by state and national politicians is certain to meet with resistance.

In California, where the state's 2006 global warming law requires emission reductions to 1990 levels by 2020, land use is being hotly debated.

The Legislature came to a halt this summer when Republicans held up the budget in an effort to exempt localities from global-warming-related lawsuits. Atty. Gen. Jerry Brown had sued San Bernardino County and pressured other counties to account for greenhouse gases in their development plans.

A hotly contested bill sponsored by Sen. Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) would require regional planning groups to set targets for reducing greenhouse gases, and could stop millions of dollars in federal, state and local transportation funds from being spent on roads that could encourage sprawl.

The bill, which passed the Senate but was carried over until next year, is hotly opposed by the California building industry, the League of Cities and other groups that want the state to stay out of local planning decisions.

The Urban Land Institute report, however, highlights the massive turnover expected in the nation's housing and commercial structures. According to Chris Nelson, a researcher at Virginia Tech, two-thirds of the structures in the U.S. in 2050 will have been built between now and then. Construction will include 89 million new or replaced homes, and 190 billion square feet of new offices, stores and institutions. If only 60% of that development is clustered in mixed-use, compact areas, it could slash greenhouse gas emissions from transportation by 7%, the report said.

The nation's changing demographics may make that easier. "We have a senior tsunami coming," said Don Chen, founder of the advocacy group Smart Growth America. "Baby boomers are trading in their big houses for condos closer to town. These folks are demanding walkable neighborhoods. We need to pressure governments to give them choices."

The study called for the upcoming \$300-billion federal transportation funding bill to reward, rather than discourage, compact growth. "Funding today is tied to vehicle-miles-traveled," Chen said. "So areas are rewarded for driving more."

Compact growth, according to the study, allows consumers to spend less on gas and saves taxes that would otherwise be spent on pumping water and building new roads to far-away subdivisions. "Southern California's regional planners have found that by locating new housing near transit corridors, they can save \$48 billion that they would have spent on new roads," said Amanda Eaken, a planning consultant for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The California Chamber of Commerce and the California Building Industry Assn. declined to comment on the report, but James Burling, litigation director for the Pacific Legal Foundation, a conservative group that has battled environmentalists over land-use issues, dismissed "the latest anti-sprawl crusade based on global warming" as "no different from every other anti-sprawl campaign from Roman times to the present."

"So long as people ardently desire to live and raise children in detached homes with a bit of lawn, there is virtually nothing that government bureaucrats can do that will thwart that," he said.

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