

THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

What to do when people don't fit into the template

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On a curbside street that cuts through the once-vast UC Riverside agricultural experimentation fields sits a large building that looms almost imposingly, like the Pentagon. Fitting, because this building will house a state agency that is waging war against you – if you drive a car.

Kind of ironic, isn't it, that other parts of those former ag fields have been turned into great big parking lots. For cars. Those will be plainly visible to all those California Air Resources Board functionaries who soon will populate their new Riverside offices overlooking part of the UCR campus.

Collegians parking their cars in those lots may not realize how vehemently their state government opposes them. The state's preference is transit.

But wait. Transit – mainly buses and trains – may be running into an existential problem. Ridership has been, in most places, on a decades-long decline. Taxpayers subsidize every ride. The fewer the passengers, the more expensive each per-rider subsidy. Lately, the needle is closer to the unsustainable all-subsidy-no-riders.

Now ridership has virtually collapsed due to coronavirus. For a lot of riders, trains and buses are Petri dishes of infection. Riders don't know who was just sitting in that seat, or about that person next to them. They don't know if the air system is spreading virus throughout the cabin.

Besides, some people just want the freedom of their own vehicle, to go where they want, when they want, in a manner that's timely and convenient. That's just not as easily done working the bus schedules.

Coronavirus could upset the political juggernaut pushing transit. A key pillar of the governor's Regions Rise Together initiative, according to one of its leaders, is building "a statewide rail network and the recommitment to building out high-speed rail." Splendid. The vast majority of Californians get around in cars or other personal conveyances.

Meanwhile, legislators are passing laws punishing people with cars. Your car gets older but the annual license fee keeps rising. They raise gasoline taxes, institute "road diets" and take other steps to make driving a car as difficult and expensive as possible.

They've even passed a host of housing laws designed to steer residents into high-density housing next to ... transit. Single-family home with a yard? That's just bad in the eyes of the people we elected to public office.

But wait. It turns out, for fear of disease, that some people don't want to be stacked right on top of one another in high-density domiciles. This could be yet another existential problem.

The very things politicians we elected want the most – multi-family, dense housing and transit – put people at risk for coronavirus. And for whatever comes after coronavirus.

To be sure, the post-coronavirus period will likely see other long-term changes in transportation habits. We don't yet know the effect on commuting, or schools, or retail centers, or just traffic patterns generally.

But we know reliable roads will be essential, even if our elected officials don't, because roads convey more than people in cars (or transit). The Wall Street Journal recently reported that even before the pandemic, e-bikes were a hot commodity. Deloitte Insights supposes that by 2023 more than 40 million a year will be sold worldwide. Among other possible personal transporters the Journal featured were electric unicycles, miniature cars, electric skateboards, stand-up e-scooters and electric mopeds.

Some may counter that building and maintaining roads using taxpayer money is a subsidy and encourages car use. But roads serve more than people in cars and the subsidy, if that's what it is, benefits the road-using public generally, including e-bikers and transit riders.

And anyway, today's cars aren't like those of old. By CARB's own data, they're 99 percent cleaner than they were in 1970. The Cato Institute's Randal O'Toole recently wrote in these pages that compared with 1970, autos use only half the energy.

On the one hand, we could build and maintain roads to benefit those using cars, transit or myriad other means of getting from here to there. Or we can continue to try to use state power to impose on Californians a transportation and lifestyle option that's popular only in some particular political circles.

That option, pushed by such established institutions as CARB and the Legislature, hasn't been widely embraced by the public despite considerable taxpayer-paid marketing and positive media publicity over many years, and now may risk public health. A state run by bright people ought to be able to do better.