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Infrastructure: invest or collapse

By TONY PAUKER AND MARY LYDON

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I was struck how a short drive could be so symbolic of our current land-use and budget situation. Early one Monday morning, I rolled out my trash and recycling bins. That always gives some guilty pleasure, like getting dessert for free at a restaurant. That is probably because I don't pay for pick up. It had rained the prior week so I then got a push broom and swept the street in front of my house. We only have our streets swept the fourth Thursday of every other month -- six times a year, assuming no one is parked on the street. While I like a clean street, I really dislike swimming in the oil ash and grit I sweep up, and everything in the gutter eventually ends up in the ocean if it is not swept. When that was all done, I started my drive. My first call was to the Streets Division of the city to request the large and growing pothole a block down be repaired. It seems only a half-inch of rain wreaks havoc with our streets (and it is a dry year). To the city's credit, that pothole was patched within a few days. Later that day, I described my morning to a colleague who lives in a new master-planned community. He shares not of my issues (except he pays for his trash pickup).

What this Monday-morning experience shows is the state of our infrastructure, budget and the development cycle. After World War II, San Diego we saw a massive wave of growth to house our returning GIs and supply homes for those employed in our growing defense industries. From La Jolla and Pacific Beach to Clairemont, Linda Vista, National City and much of what is the "core" of San Diego, this growth not only brought housing, retail and employment centers, but also saw the development of much of our pre-freeway backbone infrastructure. Over the ensuing decades development leap-frogged these communities into more planned communities -- everywhere from Scripps Ranch to eastern Chula Vista to Carmel Valley and beyond. Each of these newer communities also saw new infrastructure, some of even with assessment districts to assure its long-term maintenance. While we grew outward, our older areas such as our downtown saw a lack of investment. Over the decades, this has led to decay of the infrastructure. But there are examples where we have turned this trend around. Without the incredible efforts of CCDC, it is very unlikely that downtown would be in as good shape as it is. CCDC perhaps creates a template that can be modified to work in other urban neighborhoods.

As a small developer focusing on infill areas, we clearly hear the public outcry about the lack of infrastructure. Any new development is perceived as furthering the burden of our crumbling infrastructure. If you want to build, you better remove those overhead power lines, build a new park, fix the street and sidewalk and provide a bunch of new parking so I can keep parking my car in the street and use my garage for storage. In a new master plan, the situation is simple. Before you start you pass a bond, use the proceeds to pay for infrastructure, and the new residents and businesses pay for the bond through a slight increase in property taxes. New residents are more than happy to accept this fee because of the benefits they receive.

In our older communities, we have come to expect very low costs to enjoy our location. Proposition 13 established our tax rate, more recent propositions mandated new taxes require a two-thirds majority of the electorate to levy such fees, and our charter establishes free trash service. I, too, certainly enjoy a free lunch. We have also been able to cast a blind eye to the physical impacts on our city -- that is until our beach is closed due to a sewer spill (or just rain), or until we hit a pothole, or until our once verdant park is a weed patch. City budget issues aside, can we accommodate new infill growth AND enhance the quality of life in our older communities? It must be not only because we have to address the issues, but also because other cities have proven it is feasible. Denver and Phoenix have both shown leadership on improving infrastructure citywide. In San Diego, we passed Proposition MM to repair and build new schools with great success. We have proven we can build (and fix) smarter.

This year, the Urban Land Institute will hold its fourth annual Planet Awards for Smart Growth and Sustainability June 26 at the Balboa Theatre. Awards will be presented for best practices in land use that are ecologically sound, economically viable, socially beneficial and culturally appropriate for development projects or plans and visionaries that accommodate our growing population, grow our economy, and enhance our lifestyle and well-being. Finding solutions to our neglected infrastructure is smart and adds to the sustainability of our region but will not be easy. Creative solutions must be found and more than likely we will need to pay for those solutions. Neglecting smart growth and sustainable strategies is potentially threatening to our city. As Jared Diamond writes about in his best-selling book "Collapse," societies choose to fail or succeed. By ignoring warning signs, especially when a pattern of catastrophe surrounds us, we consciously choose our own peril.

Pauker is chair and Lydon is executive director of Urban Land Institute of San Diego/Tijuana.