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New National Academies Study Affirms Links Between Development Patterns, Transportation, Emissions, and Energy

CONTACT: Alex Goldschmidt, Smart Growth America, (202) 207-3355 x112,
agoldschmidt@smartgrowthamerica.org

Washington, DC – The Transportation Research Board of the National Academies of Science yesterday released a Congress-commissioned report entitled, [*Driving and the Built Environment: The Effects of Compact Development on Motorized Travel, Energy Use and CO2 Emissions*](#). The study by a panel of transportation planning experts looked at the role smarter planning and development could play in reducing oil dependency and carbon emissions. Geoff Anderson, President and CEO of Smart Growth America, issued this statement in response:

“This timely and important study provides resounding affirmation that urban development is both a key contributor to oil dependency and climate change and an essential factor in combating those twin threats to our future.

Since 1980, the number of miles Americans drive each day has grown three times faster than population, and almost twice as fast as vehicle registrations. The authors found that ‘dispersed, automobile-dependent development patterns have come at a cost, consuming vast quantities of undeveloped land, increasing the nation’s dependence on imported petroleum, and increasing greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global warming.’

The report confirms what [*Growing Cooler*](#) and dozens of studies have now established: Meeting the growing demand for conveniently located homes in walkable neighborhoods could significantly reduce the growth in the number of miles Americans drive, shrinking the nation’s carbon footprint while giving us more choices in our communities.

Because the transportation sector accounts for nearly a third of greenhouse gas emissions and 70 percent of our oil use, we have to find a way to reduce the amount each of us has to drive each day, especially as population grows toward 400 million.

Market research shows that a majority of future housing demand lies in smaller homes and lots, townhouses, and condominiums in neighborhoods with nearby access to jobs, activities and public transportation. The researchers note that

demographic changes, shrinking households, rising gas prices, lengthening commutes and cultural shifts all play a role in that demand.

While demand for such smart-growth development is growing, the authors note that government regulations, government spending, and transportation policies still favor sprawling, automobile-dependent development. Changing those policies should play a role in addressing climate and energy issues, the report concludes.

Doing so comes with an array of important side benefits, as the authors point out: ‘More compact, mixed-use development should reduce some infrastructure costs, increase the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of public transit, and expand housing choices where compact developments are undersupplied. Other benefits include reduced conversion of agricultural and other environmentally fragile areas and greater opportunities for physical activity by facilitating the use of non-motorized modes of travel, such as walking and bicycling.

As Congress moves forward with climate legislation and the transportation authorization, there is a once in a lifetime opportunity to realize the multiple benefits that investments in green transportation and smarter community planning would create for the country. Congress should include policy in these landmark bills that will provide cities and towns with the resources and guidance to create the walkable, more convenient communities that Americans want.”

Smart Growth America is the only national organization dedicated to researching, advocating for and leading coalitions to bring smart growth practices to more communities nationwide. From providing more sidewalks to ensuring more homes are built near public transit or that productive farms remain a part of our communities, smart growth helps make sure people across the nation can live in great neighborhoods. For additional information, please visit www.smartgrowthamerica.org.

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