NEWTON TAB
on TOWNONLINE.com

Zoning and Energy

By **Gil Woolley** / Special To The Tab
Wednesday, September 14, 2006

The single most important obstacle in the US to reducing dependence on imported oil and our disproportionate generation of CO2 is the settlement pattern that has grown up over the years. Apart from few older cities, most Americans are almost totally dependent on their personal automobiles for essential journeys to work, to stores, to church, to public offices and to entertainment.

In 1900 most jobs were in Boston and residents of suburbs like Newton and Wellesley commuted by rail or subway. Thousands still do. But today, residents have jobs all over the region. Living in Newton, for years I commuted to Marlboro, Northboro, Littleton and Shrewsbury, none of which were conveniently accessible by public transportation. And when my company relocated our workplaces, it was assumed that we all had automobiles. There was some effort to set up car pools, but I never found one that met my needs.

The US will soon be competing for oil supplies with the rapidly growing demand from mushrooming Asian economies. The price of oil will continue to rise and so will the US foreign trade deficit. There are many good reasons to guide development towards less energy intensive patterns. Massachusetts has officially adopted a “Smart Growth” policy, but most land use decisions in the Commonwealth are made at the town level, and many towns and cities have zoning regulations that do not encourage “Smart Growth”.

The most glaring example is large single lot zoning, two or even four acres in some outer suburbs. This pattern of sprawl requires virtually every adult family member to have use of a car to get to work, to school, to stores and everyplace else. It also adds to the demand on utilities, school buses and snow plowing. Newton’s villages with public transportation are very appealing to single people and childless couples. Those villages would benefit culturally, socially and economically from having more clustered housing units to accommodate them.

“Single Use Zoning,” another obstacle to more energy efficient residential patterns, has the effect of discouraging residential building in central business districts. In contrast, “Mixed Use Zoning” allows multi-story residential building above retail and offices.

When housing is within easy walking distance of subway or light rail service, it allows many people to become less car-dependent. With a larger base of customers within walking distance, local grocery, hardware and clothing stores are more likely to thrive, further reducing automobile dependence.

Living closer together in suburbs has many compensations. When shopping, going to the library, to a local restaurant or to church you have many opportunities to encounter people. Children and teenagers tend to be better behaved when they know that

neighbors and family friends may be around. And wouldn't it be easier for them to be less auto dependent! In short, anonymous suburbs can become communities.

Then there is health. When many activities involve walking, rather than driving, this provides more continuous moderate exercise without the need to schedule time at the gym. Walking burns calories, and people who walk are less prone to the obesity and its many related health problems. And don't forget the personal economic benefits. Not needing a second car saves finance charges, taxes and insurance as well as gasoline.

I grew up in a medium density suburb of Nottingham, England where almost all the homes were single family with a garden and few people owned cars. Industries, schools and colleges, major stores and entertainment were all accessible by public transportation. It was many times more energy efficient as similar suburbs in the US and frankly, just as nice a place to live. Affordable gasoline will soon be a thing of the past, so let's start preparing for a future where we are much less dependent on it.

Gil Woolley is a retired engineer, and an active member of the Sierra Club.

This article is archived at www.greendecade.org/environmentpage