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*Expensive fuel drives rethinking of community -- photo by Corey McKenna*

By some reports, the cost of gasoline knows no limits. With China consuming ever more fuel to support a rapid-growing economy, a declining dollar and the constant threat of turmoil in the world, we will only see costs escalating.

Some families are driving less, or trading in their SUVs or gas-guzzlers for something more efficient, and some are moving to be closer to their work. Maybe now we will start thinking differently about our cities, indeed our region, and the urgent need to redefine our community.

For decades, urban affairs columnist and author Neal Peirce has trumpeted the underappreciated importance of "citistates," which he defines as "one or more historic central cities surrounded by cities and towns which have a shared identification, function as a single zone for trade, commerce and communication, and are characterized by social, economic and environmental interdependence."

In a very real sense, the shift from an industrial to an information society is the *raison d'être* for revisiting the American love affair with the automobile and asking some very tough questions about its role in the new economy. By doing so, we will begin to open the door to new thinking about the architecture of our cities and renewing their place in our lives. The current oil crisis, as it is being called, may be the point where we start making some decisions about smart growth, urban sprawl and density.

If we are to capitalize on this shift in which telecommunications becomes a substitute for transportation, we must make some conscious decisions to change our habits. Given the spread and influence of the Internet we now have a choice: to get in our car for a loaf of bread or a book or CD, or get online; to push for mass transit and/or light rail, to argue for "car free" zones and "walkable communities." To accept density as a way of life or risk for all time the chance to rebuild our cities.

No technology in human history is having, or is likely to have, such tremendous influence on life and work and play, and in the transforming process, on our physical space. The fuel crisis gives us further excuse to start doing something.

While a "smart community" -- a community which makes a conscious decision to aggressively deploy technology as a catalyst to solving its social and business needs --- will undoubtedly focus on building its high-speed broadband infrastructures, the real opportunity is in rebuilding and renewing a sense of place, and in the process, a sense of civic pride.

The concept of cities as engines of civilization remains deeply embedded in our collective psyche. As cities of the past were built along railroads, waterways and interstate highways, cities of the future will be built along information highways -- broadband communication links to homes, schools and offices, hospitals and cultural centers, and through the World Wide Web to millions of other locations all over the world.

Some cities will become the ghost towns of the twenty-first century Information Age. Some will succeed and survive in this next transition to a knowledge-based, global information economy and society. Indeed, cities of the future: the smart and sustainable communities or mega regions -- built for the Digital Age -- will play a central role in the rebirth of civilization in the 21st century.

The purpose of the city, as an Athenian scholar once observed, is "to bring people together" in harmony with one another and with their environment for "economic gain and glory." We can no longer do that if we don't use technology as a tool of transformation; if we are unwilling to see that the Internet has offered us an alternative to our reliance on the automobile; if we do not rethink our land use and smart-growth policies.

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