

# Transit Villages are the way to save farms, open space

**Rod Diridon Sr., Bay Area News Group, 9-17-13**

Diridon, executive director of the Mineta Transportation Institute at San Jose State University, is president of the Santa Clara County League of Conservation Voters and former chair of the Association of Bay Area Governments and Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

California's Department of Finance projects nearly 60 million Californians, up from today's 38 million, by 2060. That's like dropping New York's population on our beautiful state, but the growth can't be avoided.

That human deluge can be accommodated, as in the past, with massive urban sprawl that decimates the last Central Valley farms and our valley's water supply and hillside views. That will create terminal gridlock, exacerbate climate change and jeopardize the continued economic and environmental viability of Silicon Valley.

Or we can create "transit villages" on top of many of the valley's current 50-plus rail stations.

Transit villages can accommodate much of our area's expected growth in more affordable housing atop a podium platform built right above the stations and station parking. These multi-acre platforms would be restricted to pedestrians and bicyclists with parks and family amenities interspersed between high-rise apartment and condominium towers. The podium-level floor would be dedicated to convenience commercial, neighborhood association community rooms, preschools, libraries and so on.

The transit villagers would tend to work along the transit system. So the morning commute would be an elevator to the podium floor, drop the kids at preschool, proceed by elevator to the ground floor transit (BART, light rail, commuter rail) and take that "horizontal elevator" to work. That trip is reversed at the end of the day, picking up groceries, laundry and the children on the podium level, and arriving home without having to buy \$4-plus-per-gallon gas or fight parking, congestion and the baby's car seat.

Other countries with more population per acre than the U.S. seem to have more open space. Indeed, traveling through Europe or most of Asia is primarily through valuable, protected farm land with intermittent high-density cities built on top of and around rail stations. That eliminates the need for a second car, drastically reduces the carbon footprint, provides the riders and revenue that the transit systems were designed to accommodate, creates a healthy sense of local community and significantly reduces the urban sprawl, congestion and pollution that threaten our valley's future.

The regional Association of Bay Area Governments and Metropolitan Transportation Commission recently approved Plan Bay Area, which calls for transit villages, although often in the form of higher-density neighborhoods near rather than on top of train stations. Some of the valley's cities are beginning to consider those plans with the support of many in the region's industrial, environmental and professional planning communities. But neighbors often seem opposed without understanding the concept or the alternatives to accommodate inevitable growth.

A relatively timid example of this idea is the five- to six-story proposed development, with ground floor commercial, at 785 The Alameda diagonally across from the San Jose Diridon Station and near the SAP Center. While worthy of support, the number of proposed units is modest for a site so well-served by transit.

The rail transit stations in the valley cost billions of dollars to build and were predicated upon nearby development and transit ridership that transit villages represent. The valley could aim for a more comprehensive

approach to these valuable rail transit interchanges and proceed now to master-plan, zone and expedite the building permits for compatible developments. Our rapidly growing job base and our rapidly warming planet deserve our urgent best effort to accommodate the unavoidable population-growth avalanche with sustainable transit villages rather than more urban sprawl.