

My name is Sonny Putter and I am a former Mayor and Councilmember of the City of Newcastle.

I have two issues to bring to your attention regarding the Demographic study on which you were briefed in the March meeting.

On page 3, we read

*“The Millennial generation (individuals born after 1980) could potentially have a long-term impact on regional housing and transportation choices. Current trends suggest this younger generation is less car-focused than older generations and values housing locations near mass transit or within walking or biking distance to work. As the Seattle area ranks as a top destination for young professionals, this could signal a greater change in transportation patterns in the region.”*

Transportation planners and decision-makers need real data – not media anecdotes – to understand trends in where people live and work, and what future travel patterns they should plan for.

The mainstream media persist in telling us that the Millennials are fundamentally different, not buying cars and rejecting suburbia. A huge survey last year by John Burns Real Estate Consulting sought the housing preference views of a million Americans, sorted by generations. Survey researchers found that only 16% of Millennials preferred to live in an urban core, while 55% preferred an inner suburb, 38% an outer suburb and 5% an exurban location. The researchers gave all respondents a list of housing design preferences (with photos), and Millennials overwhelmingly chose the “modern traditional” style of single-family house.

To find out what Millennials do, not just what they say, you need to examine Census data. A report by demographer Wendell Cox on housing trends in NewGeography.com (July 9, 2014) showed that the number of Millennials living in urban cores increased from 4.3 million to 4.6 million between 2000 and 2010. But because of rising total numbers, the fraction of Millennials living in urban cores decreased from 20.2% to 19.3%. Where did the rest of them live? In 2010, 42.0% of Millennials lived in early, closer-in suburbs, 24.4% lived in later suburbs and 14.3% lived in exurban areas.

In short, revealed preference data do not support the urban-centric orientation of most Millennials, and the jury is certainly still out on how their travel behavior may change as they start families and buy homes.

Similarly, on page 3 of the Demographic study, we read

*“The retiring Baby Boomer generation exhibits similarly more urban-oriented housing choices than past retiring generations. Retirement living choices now consider pedestrian and transit oriented access to cultural activities and lifestyle amenities.”*

I want to point out that this statement will apply to only a very small minority of the Baby Boomer generation. According to numerous surveys, including a comprehensive study by AARP, 85% to 90% of Baby Boomers plan to “age in place”. That intention is well reflected in Figure 3-3 (in purple) on page 17 of the Demographic Study. The Demographic study notes that the census block groups with a high current proportion of residents 65 and over are scattered throughout the four county area, with no obvious concentration. Transit agencies have consistently recognized that senior populations, like special needs populations subject to ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) mandates, are very high cost populations to serve. The Demographic study projects a doubling of the senior population to 2040, with all other age cohorts declining as a percent of total population. Given this projection and the high cost of serving this population, the preponderant housing choice of seniors to “age in place” should get a lot more attention in considering future transportation needs than it has in the Demographic study.

Last week, I listened to the transportation concerns of cities, counties, ports and transit agencies in southwest Washington at a meeting of the Washington State Transportation Commission in Kelso. I was impressed that even the transit agency in tiny Wahkiakum County focused their limited resources on serving seniors and the disabled to get them to shopping and doctor appointments. Similarly, the Cowlitz Tribe, which has no casino to fund services, provides a transit service to primarily rural senior and disabled Tribe members, many of them in wheelchairs, helping them get to shopping and even to out-of-service-area doctor appointments at no cost to the rider.

Transportation planners and decision-makers need to provide the transportation infrastructure required by the way people actually choose to live and work, not by what anecdotal information the mainstream media chooses to report.

Thank you.

Sonny Putter