

A walkable, bikeable site for Pullman High

By Chuck Pezeshki | Posted: Saturday, November 16, 2013 12:00 am

Like a couple of hundred other parents, every morning I drive up Hall Drive and drop my half-asleep teenager at the door of Pullman High School. I make the trek back up in the afternoon to fetch him for the usual guitar lessons and homework.

Back and forth, back and forth. The loop costs me at least \$50 extra in gas a month. Bus service is somewhere between inadequate to poor, if one believes teenagers have something better to do if they want to be competitive for college scholarships than sit on the bus for two hours a day for a three-mile commute.

The reason for this ritual of endurance is our high school is located in a terrible place. It is not in a reasonably walkable, nor bikeable location. It is not integrated in the life of the urban part of Pullman, anemic though that might be (and largely because the high school is located where it is). And the fact that it is perched on top of one of the highest spots in town makes transit up to the high school a meandering path for anyone not living in one of the adjacent subdivisions.

It's a 20 minute there-and-back ritual that must be endured twice daily. The location does not allow for meaningful independence of any children without their own car and promotes a penal colony atmosphere. The children, instead of having an integrated center of activities, are paroled on a daily basis from a building that has the charm of the maze of the legendary Minotaur. And, once departed, they can't get back up there on their own.

I have an interesting history with the building itself. My students, directed by a recruited seasoned energy conservation professional working pro bono, declared the building DOA back in the mid-'90s. And there's little disagreement the building is a sprawling, hallucinatory nightmare. Just try to find your way around it without a guide. But there's been no discussion in the community on what kind of reasoning got us there in the first place. The building was built in the early '70s as a sop to the dysfunctional mentality of endless suburban grace. The open architecture itself — more at place in L.A. than a small town — had to be walled in because of weather. What we didn't realize is that the siting itself — on the edge of subdivisions, with auto transportation as king, was also a reflection of that thinking.

The old high school, now the Gladish Community Center, reflected a more communitarian, conservative ethos. And we need that to return.

Building a high school as close as possible to the city center, possibly on South Grand, on top of one of the easily relocatable strip malls, would create a walkable, bikeable location children could get to on their own. It would need to be multistory — but that alone is good for students. Walking up and down stairs used to be part of going to school, and a new building could easily have disability access

formally integrated. Playing fields could be kept where they are now, with bus access provided, or an integrated solution sought with Lincoln Middle School. One doesn't even need to stretch the imagination much, like communities in Europe have, with public escalators, to fulfill the goal of an interconnected school system built around our steep hills.

If it costs more in the short run, long-term it will save bundles of money just by eliminating the daily car traffic. And a different siting could jump-start a dialogue about how we want our community to function. Instead of a sclerotic core, limping along with marginal businesses and plasma banks, a high school located downtown, with our own vibrant young people, might just drive our own renaissance.

The location of the new high school is not a done deal. Contact the Pullman School Board now.

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