

## An Introduction to the 2001 Issue of the *Berkeley Planning Journal*

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Planners have always been deeply interested in and concerned about the effects of technology on human settlements. There is a rich and varied literature on technics and civilization, to borrow from Mumford's brilliant account (1934). Whether looking at machines, autos, computers or the Internet, this literature provides a rich treasure-trove of social and historical analysis. This issue of the *Berkeley Planning Journal* makes a contribution to this topic by examining the effects of technology on planning and urban and regional development. The editors of the *Berkeley Planning Journal* have selected four articles on this topic. Each provides a distinctly different perspective on technology's impacts on planning and urban development.

AnnaLee Saxenian's article provides an insightful comparison of California's Silicon Valley and Taiwan's Hsinchu-Taipei region. Her assessment illustrates the fundamental importance of international networks of information, advice and partnerships. She explains how a community of US-educated Taiwanese engineers has literally spearheaded Taiwan's emergence as a leading center of computer and information technology. The lesson to be drawn from the case study is that institutions matter deeply. They are the drivers of technological adaptation and change. Without these institutions (primarily the Chinese Institute of Engineers and other loosely associated groups) technological change would not have come so quickly nor had so dramatic an impact on Taiwan.

Bill Pitkin's historical survey of technology and planning provides an excellent overview of the planning and technological change literature. Pitkin argues that planners have routinely fallen under the spell of emerging technologies. One reason he offers to explain why we are in thrall of the Internet is that planners have a technocratic way of thinking. We heralded or feared the automobile age, the computer, and now the internet and digital age. Pitkin argues that planners should be more circumspect in their thinking and pay more attention to the unintended consequences of technology.

John Thomas's paper introduces us to a very real threat of the Internet age—the loss of local sales taxes to virtual retailers. Thomas identifies 15 San Francisco Bay area communities that are highly dependent on local

sales taxes. If the Internet undermines sales tax revenue in these towns they will suffer severe fiscal distress. Thomas then goes on to assess the impacts of three alternative sales tax revenue sharing schemes (based on place of business, residence of buyer and population). His scenarios illustrate the potential differential effects of the population and point of purchase proposals that are being discussed in California's legislature.

The final article of the issue by Stephen Wheeler provides a cautionary note on the optimistic way in which planners tend to view technology. Like Pitkin, he argues that planners often ignore the adverse impacts of technology on communities. Wheeler concludes that planners should exercise caution—

We must watch technology carefully both to make sure that its power does not overwhelm social and environmental values within urban development and to ensure that its concomitant mindsets do not dominate the planning profession itself.

There is much wisdom in what Stephen Wheeler says, but I would urge planners to not over-react to the challenges and opportunities created by technological change.