

Matt Regan: State climate laws must keep up with electric cars

By Matt
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In the late 1800s, most of the world's major cities were grappling with huge environmental and quality-of-life problems caused by noxious traffic emissions. Planners in London were in full-scale panic, warning that unless something drastic was done, within 50 years every street would be buried under 9 feet of those emissions — namely, horse manure.

The problem was so bad they called it “the end of the city.” The response from cities like London, Paris and New York was to build huge infrastructure projects to dispose of manure, and to strictly regulate who could have a horse. An advance in technology called the internal combustion engine, and an entrepreneur called Henry Ford, made all of that urban planning obsolete in less than 20 years.

Fast forward 100 years and we are having a similar debate, this time around the problems created by carbon emissions from those same internal combustion engines.

California has taken an international leadership role in this effort by passing groundbreaking laws such as Assembly Bill 32, which aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2030. Its land use corollary, Senate Bill 375, seeks to greatly reduce vehicle miles traveled by focusing population growth in less auto-dependent urban areas.

The goals of AB 32 and SB 375 are laudable. We should be reducing our carbon production in all aspects of our lives, including how we commute to work. With 40% of greenhouse gas emissions produced in California coming from transportation, reducing car and truck emissions makes sense.

However, SB 375 dismisses or ignores rapid advances in engine technology to help meet our carbon reduction goals. Instead, the measure focuses all its attention on reducing overall vehicle miles — regardless if that mile traveled is in a solar-powered plug-in vehicle or in a truck towing a boat.

Under current law, communities are rewarded for reducing car usage regardless of whether doing so moves us any closer to achieving our carbon reduction goals. That disconnect will only widen as automotive technology advances. And it will lead to unwanted and unintended consequences in how we plan and invest to meet our future housing and transportation needs.

If reducing vehicle miles is a proxy for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, we must recognize that not all miles traveled are created equal. Last year, California became the first state with more than 100,000 electric and hybrid vehicles on the road, with sales of these vehicles doubling from 2012-13 and on a similar pace for 2014.

SB 375 should be amended to recognize that fact and give credit not only for reducing mileage, but also for successfully fostering and growing the use of low- and zero-emission vehicles.

Otherwise, 100 years from now, when our roads are full of solar-powered, driver-less smart cars, carrying more people at higher speeds, lower cost and with a far smaller environmental harm than the most efficient public transit system, planners will talk about us in the same humorous manner as we talk about the terrified people of London in 1894.

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