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The Width and Value of Residential Streets

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Issue

Street rights-of-way are typically a city's most valuable asset. Streets serve numerous functions — access, movement, and the provision of space for on-street parking, children's play, and social interaction. But the more land that is devoted to streets, the less land there is available for housing, parks, offices, and other land uses.

In this research project, UCLA researchers quantified the width of streets in 20 of the largest counties in the United States, and the value of the land under those streets. They then analyzed the trade-offs between wider streets and more land for other urban functions, particularly housing.

Key Research Findings

Streets in the U.S. are much wider than in other countries.

In the 20 counties studied, the average street width ranges from 44 feet to 64 feet (Figure 1). In Tokyo, by contrast, the average street constructed since 1990 is just 16 feet wide.

Street widths are normally dictated by subdivision codes and local street design manuals.

When rounded to the nearest foot, 39% of residential streets in the sample are exactly 50 feet or 60 feet wide. Moreover, the variation in width between counties suggests that local ordinances are the determining factor, not national-level standards nor guidance from, for example, the Institute of Transportation Engineers.

The land under residential streets is worth \$959 billion in the 20 counties studied. The highest street land values

are found in coastal California, most notably Santa Clara County. Even though the county's streets are relatively narrow by U.S. standards, a combination of low densities and high property prices means that the value of land under residential streets in Santa Clara County reaches \$146,000 per housing unit.

Streets could be much narrower. Access to properties is the major function of most residential streets, and that function only requires a 16-foot wide right-of-way. A single lane, or "yield street," can handle two-way traffic. And rather than a continuous parking lane, streets can have irregular widths — narrower in place, and widening out to provide occasional parking bays. The same is true of space for trees and other landscaping, which can be accommodated at intervals and does not require a continuous strip.

Conclusion

In many U.S. cities, and particularly in high-cost West Coast counties, residential streets are too wide. Housing costs are inflated, densities are constrained, and overall social welfare is reduced because too much land is devoted to streets instead of housing. Counties and cities could turn streets into housing in the following ways:

- Reduce street width requirements in subdivision ordinances, or eliminate those requirements and allow developers to make the trade-offs between land for streets and land for housing.

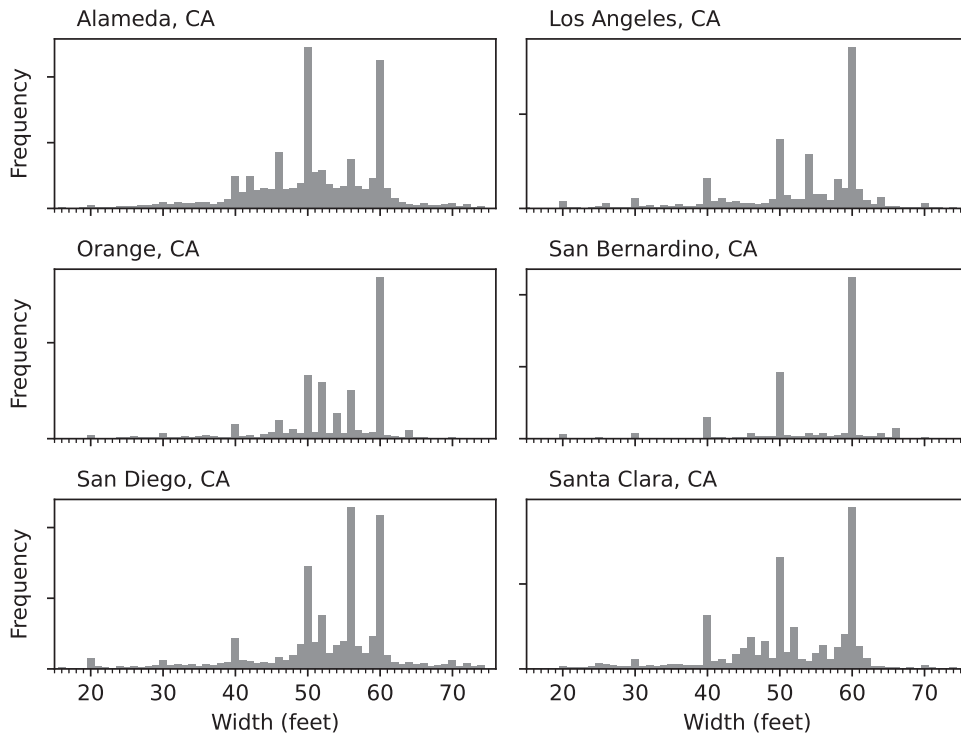


Figure 1: Most streets in large California counties are precisely 40, 50, or 60 feet wide, showing the influence of local subdivision standards.

- Narrow existing streets in conjunction with new development by selling the excess width to the adjacent property owners or ceding it in exchange for more affordable housing or other community benefits.
- Allow homeowners to extend residential lots into the street right-of-way, in order to create space for an accessory dwelling unit in the front setback.
- Recognize that those living in cars or camper vans already live on the street. Cities could formalize this practice by allowing vehicle owners to rent part of excessively wide streets on a short- or long-term basis

while providing sanitation, water, electricity and other basic services. In a similar way, live-aboard canal boats in some European countries turn surplus transportation infrastructure (canals) into a relatively low-cost source of additional housing.

More Information

For more information about the findings presented in this brief, please contact Adam Millard-Ball at adammb@ucla.edu. Associated publications and resources are available on the interactive project website at streetwidths.its.ucla.edu.

Further Sources:

Millard-Ball, A. (2021). The width and value of residential streets. *Journal of the American Planning Association*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2021.1903973>

Millard-Ball, A. (2022). Viewpoint: Turning streets into housing. *Journal of Transport and Land Use*. <https://jtl.org/index.php/jtl/article/view/2020>

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