Our love affair with big things

By Lawrence A. Herzog

President Bush’s trip to Brazil last week renewed attention to our national energy crisis. Brazil is a world leader in alternative biofuels technology. Back in January, in his State of the Union address, Bush surprised some of his critics by mentioning the reduction of gasoline consumption as a goal of his administration.

Cheaper alternative fuels, however, only touch the surface of our crisis. A darker shadow looms over the nation.

Our cities are overweight. We have developed the world’s largest appetite for giant homes, more land, more possessions, bigger vehicles, abandoned stores and more malls stuffed into the most crowded, sprawling, amoeba-like urban regions on the planet.

Consider just a few of our supersizing tendencies:

**HOMES**

The average size of a new single-family home in the United States has doubled since the 1950s—from 1,300 square feet to 2,340 square feet. But didn’t family size grow during that period? No. Families have actually gotten smaller. During the baby booms (1946-1970), household size was 3.7 members per household, today it is 2.6.

Despite declining housing costs, developerscompete around the country to squeeze every usable inch of bigger homes. In Texas, new suburban homes averaged a whopping 3,000 square feet a decade ago, but some local builder break-through, and thus, along with other greenhouse gases, a direct cause of global warming. The average car will emit 50 tons of CO2 over its lifetime. So even new fuel-efficient small cars add an estimated 134 tons of CO2 over their lifetimes.

-Unfortunately, many Americans consider it a badge of honor to own a gas-guzzling home or drive an oversized car or SUV. Automakers plug into these American fantasies by giving light trucks names like "Range Rover," "Ram," "Voyon," "Expedition."- that evoke the wilderness of "big-box" retailers (Home Depot, Target, Wal-Mart, etc.) and more recently, the introduction of the "megacenters" or "supercenter" that combine big-box, warehouse-style consumption with daily product needs (groceries, pharmacies, etc.).

Big-box stores, at modified sizes, are certainly worth having for the cost savings they bring to consumers. But, like any urban design configuration, when the scale of a retail center grows too large, it distorts urban space, destroys neighborhood scale, pedestrians places and makes people more addicted to oversized cars, driving our cities overweight.

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President Bush’s interest in the cost and supply of fuel makes a larger problem: the size (and weight) of our cars. We are driving larger and more powerful vehicles. In 1990, only 2 percent of new vehicles were in the SUV category; 15 years later, one in four new vehicles purchased were SUVs.

A staggering 50 percent of all U.S. private vehicles owned are now in the "light truck" (SUVs, pickups, minivan) category.

Even in the midst of evidence of dwindling petroleum supplies and escalating prices, automakers reportedly believe U.S. consumers still want larger vehicles. An analysis of the cash-out, retail selling price for large vehicles indicates the average consumer is committed to the production of big vehicles. "We’ve become a nation of truck buyers," Honda Vice-President John Dietz said in a speech to the National Association of Automobile Dealers.

A nation of truck buyers is not sustainable. The federal mandated "corporate average fuel economy" (CAFE) standards set for cars seek to regulate fuel economy goals. But SUVs are not required to follow these standards. As a result, they have been sold as "light trucks" since the 1970s (when most trucks were used primarily for work and commercial work).

Light trucks are not actually very light, and many are stuffed with gas guzzlers. While the industry touts average mpg figures, the fact is many trucks and SUVs are extremely inefficient, with city averages between 10 and 12 miles per gallon. The massive Ford Excursion, test-driven by Harper’s magazine in 2001, was clocked at 2.7 miles per gallon. Even this fuel consumption is one of the major sources of carbon dioxide emissions, when, in fact, these vehicles are mostly crowding the streets (and parking lots) of our cities.

**MALLS**

Not surprisingly, we are also supersizing the places where we buy our consumer goods. In 1980, the United States had 5 square feet of retail space per person. Today the average is 20 square feet per person.

Shopping malls have been around since the 1960s, but they have continued to grow in size, and now on new and more bloated forms. Most notably, the last decade saw the emergence of "big-box" retailers (Home Depot, Target, Wal-Mart, etc.) and more recently, the introduction of the "megacenters" or "supercenter" that combine big-box, warehouse-style consumption with daily product needs (groceries, pharmacies, etc.).

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Scientists tell us that energy conservation is best achieved when we preserve small scale, unique "bio-regions." For cities, this means we need to be careful not to allow mall builders and developers to simply cover the Earth with generic megacenters. Indeed, as one expert on smart growth recently said: "People who love what’s inside Superstores. They just hate what’s on the outside." Superstores or "Sprawl Marts" (as some critics call them), are not only oversized, they are ugly, one-story warehouses with no windows or roof lines, nor any attempt to create texture.

The city of San Diego rose up to the negative nefs megacenters by voting to bar Megamall and other supersize stores from more than 10,000 square feet of area for the sale of groceries. But real estate consults lobby hard to get new "sprawl" on the books. It’s time to slim down our cities, as Al Gore wisely put it, n."Inconvenient truth, but it is not the kind of message we can no longer ignore.