

L.A. area wonders where to grow

By John Ritter, USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES — Plans for two of the biggest housing developments ever built here in subdivision paradise make James Chang wince.

Chang and his wife, Kelly, epitomize the postwar Los Angeles story: young, upwardly mobile suburbanites chasing dream houses in the ever-expanding, auto-reliant megalopolis. The Changs camped outside a homebuilder's trailer for five days and nights to land — sight unseen — a new, \$500,000 four-bedroom house. Never mind Chang's hour-and-15-minute commute to west Los Angeles. The same house close to his job would go for at least \$1 million.

The Changs wanted good schools and a safe neighborhood and found them in Santa Clarita, a city of 163,000 up "the five" — Interstate 5 — from the San Fernando Valley. But now Chang dreads an even longer commute if the two big developments add 140,000 people to the thinly populated northern edge of sprawling Los Angeles County.

"The traffic is just going to be horrendous," worries the law enforcement officer, 37.

Arid high desert north of the San Gabriel Mountains is the county's last big chunk of developable open land after decades of relentless growth beyond the coastal core. In rush hour, the commute downtown is a minimum 90 minutes. If developers' plans move ahead, opponents say congestion and pollution will worsen, environmentally sensitive landscapes will be paved over and water supplies will become more strained than ever.

The two proposals — one approved, one facing environmental studies — have stoked a debate over the future of the nation's second-most-populous metropolitan area. A culture revolving around the auto and the single-family detached house, with mass transit a Johnny-come-lately, is forced to rethink whether that ethic can prevail much longer.

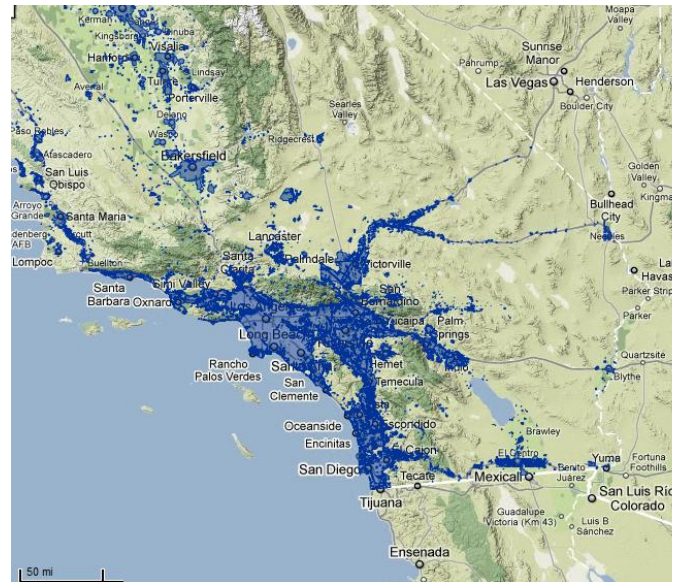
Running out of land

Los Angeles isn't the USA's only growth-constrained region. Miami is out of land and hemmed in by the Everglades. Las Vegas, the nation's fastest-growing metro area, soon will hit a barrier of federal land holdings — if it doesn't run short of water first. Less confined but still facing growth challenges are Seattle, Phoenix, Portland, Ore., Houston, New York and Boston.

Either by choice or because they must find affordable housing, people in many locales are moving farther and farther out, accepting longer commutes for the chance to buy a house.

"The message is, given our country's bounty of land, some of its bigger metro areas have bumped into limits that would have seemed impossible to our parents and grandparents," says Robert Lang, director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech.

When Los Angeles' boom began in the 1920s, few thought its huge coastal shelf would ever be built out. But suburbs spread to the foothills and raced through the canyons and into the mountains as far as they could go.



California 2050 Projected Urban Growth

Lang finds the change ironic. "It's at the core of the California being to have freedom of movement, freedom of space," he says. "But those are the very things at risk and certain to change in the next 20 years."

The five-county Los Angeles metro area will add more than 5.3 million people by 2030, the Census Bureau estimates. Los Angeles County alone will add 2.4 million. Where will they all live? Will subdivisions keep spreading into the desert? Could Southern California become one long urban traffic jam stretching more than 200 miles from San Diego to Bakersfield?

The answer is that it's a region in transition, growing differently as suburbanization comes full circle. The trend now is to revitalize the city and older suburbs. Mass transit could never compete with the almighty car, but now light rail lines are magnets for commercial and residential projects. So are scores of aging strip malls. The trade calls that "infill" — filling in vacant properties and redeveloping others.

"L.A. is about to become the world's biggest experiment in infill development," says William Fulton, president of Solimar Research Group and a city councilman in nearby Ventura. "There's decades of potential in the obsolete areas from the '60s and the '70s."

Developers who saw no market a decade ago are rushing to cash in. "Most of them realize this is where the opportunity is because the old game is just about played out," Fulton says.

Town houses and high-rise condos and apartments will be in demand. But consumers' first choice — single-family detached houses — will be harder to find in the city's core.

Projects that cut auto trips are in vogue. "We don't have the luxury anymore of having a retail center in one location and housing in another," says Rick Caruso, chief executive of Caruso Affiliated, a development company that has six infill projects underway and more soon to be announced.

Infill will be tougher and costlier because of NIMBYism — Not In My Back Yard — but Los Angeles has no other options. The two big north-county projects, Newhall Ranch and Centennial, are a dying breed in the era of great Southern California planned communities.

Environmentalists fought Newhall Ranch for years until a judge last fall cleared the last legal hurdle to a plan for nearly 21,000 homes in scenic Potrero Canyon.

Opponents intent on saving farmland, keeping the Santa Clara River healthy and protecting endangered species such as the unarmored three-spined stickleback, a tiny silver fish, say they'll contest subdivision schemes as they come up for review.

"The bottom line is we have planning by developer while the river develops arteriosclerosis," says Lynne Plambeck, president of the Santa Clarita Organization for Planning and Environment. "It's atrocious and the taxpayers pay for it over and over again."

A battle over water

Centennial, 23,000 proposed homes on 12,000 acres in the vast Tejon Ranch 60 miles north of Los Angeles, appears more sticky for developers. Opponents say the land is critical for wildlife, including the endangered California condor, because habitats of two deserts and four mountain ranges converge there.

Centennial project manager Greg Nederios says the Tejon Ranch site has been grazed for 150 years, most of its native grasses are long gone and no threatened plant or animal species have been found, though independent studies have yet to confirm that.

Zev Yaroslavsky, the only county supervisor to vote against Newhall Ranch, says more sprawl and longer commutes are taking a toll. "It's not good for the air quality of our region. It's not good for the social stability of our region. At some point, enough is enough," he says.

Marco Marengi, 37, a computer animator for Sony Pictures in Culver City, recently bought a house in Castaic, up I-5 from Santa Clarita. He likes it that Newhall Ranch will attract more retail services, but "the downside is traffic." By car, Marengi's commute is 90 minutes. "I tried that once and hated it," he says. "Now I commute with a motorcycle, and I can do it in 45 minutes."