Life After Oil

Michael E Lewyn, Florida Coastal School of Law
LIFE AFTER OIL by Michael Lewyn

Oil isn't likely to get cheaper anytime soon. That's the news from the International Energy Agency, a global think tank that provides information to the governments of 27 countries, including our own. According to IEA, energy demand is going to continue to grow thanks to strong demand from China, India and other rapidly industrializing countries, while oil supply will not grow rapidly enough to catch up with demand. This means that if even if Americans are lucky, oil will continue to gradually grow more expensive. (If we are not so lucky, oil supply may become undependable, leading to severe shocks to the economy; for a very pessimistic perspective, go to kunstler.com).

How should Northeast Florida react? For the past several decades, our city and state governments have based their policies on the assumption that oil would be cheap forever. Government has built highways designed to facilitate long-distance commuting, created neighborhood streets designed for cars rather than pedestrians and bicyclists, and enacted zoning laws designed to spread out the population over vast distances so that every conceivable destination is miles from any other, thus forcing lots and lots of driving. And as long as oil was cheap, that system worked out pretty well. To be sure, there were problems with air pollution - but new pollution control technology canceled out the impact of increased traffic. Life was hard for people who didn't have cars - but most of those people were too young or old to work anyhow, so the businesses that moved here really didn't have any reason to care whether nondrivers were inconvenienced. Traffic congestion grew - but even so, Jacksonville is far less congested than bigger cities. But now that oil is expensive, we can't count on happy motoring anymore. If we continue to build cities where most people have to drive 10 or 20 miles to work, Floridians will have to spend more and more money every year feeding their cars with gas, which in turn means they will have less and less money for anything else, which in turn means that the non-oil economy will wither. There is an alternative: we can build communities that don't require as much driving and can thus cope with high oil prices a little more easily. But how do we get there? The first thing to do when you're in a hole is to stop digging. That means, stop the government policies that got us into this mess. For example, our state government is busy building the First Coast Outer Beltway, a road going through St. Johns and Clay Counties. This highway will make those outer counties more convenient, thus shifting jobs to those counties. This means that your job might move to an interchange 20 miles from Jacksonville, which means that you will have to either move or face a longer, more expensive commute - good news for the developers who will build shopping centers at the Outer Beltway's interchanges, bad news for you. To stop these boondoggles, we need a simple rule of thumb: no new or widened roads, except in the areas that are already completely developed - central Duval County, for example. In fact, we might even limit road spending to maintaining existing roads, which means we could cut gas taxes and pass the savings on to motorists - bad news for road builders, but good news for commuters. In the past, Floridians have thrown money at highways based on concerns over traffic congestion; but as driving becomes more expensive, congestion may not be as much of a problem in the future. Indeed, we could even use our zoning powers to limit exurban development. In Oregon, cities have growth boundaries that limit dense development to cities and their established suburbs. However, we may not want to restrict property rights as aggressively as do Oregonians. But juggling transportation spending and limiting exurban sprawl only affects where we develop; we also need to change how we develop. Over the past several decades, zoning laws have prevented us from building walkable neighborhoods like San Marco and Riverside. How can we change? First, change parking and setback regulations.
Today, Jacksonville's zoning code requires most businesses to locate dozens of feet from the street and provide customers with generous amounts of parking. These rules effectively force businesses to build huge parking lots in front of stores, which in turn means walking to the store means dodging cars in the parking lot. Government should allow the free market to decide how much parking gets built, and should allow (or maybe even require) parking lots to be in back of stores, so you can walk to shops and jobs without having to go through parking lots. Second, change street design. One of the most obvious differences between pedestrian-friendly San Marco and the rest of Jacksonville is the experience of crossing the street. Crossing San Marco on foot is not so hard, while crossing the eight-lane streets of Southside is such an adventure that one might reasonably feel compelled to drive just to cross the street. This problem is, in theory, quite easy to resolve: instead of widening streets, we can make them narrower and easier to cross, by making sidewalks and medians wider and thus reducing the distance between two sides of a street. Third, we need to allow more houses and apartments to be built near commercial streets, so more people can live within walking distance of shops and bus stops. This means eliminating antiquated density restrictions in our zoning codes: there should be no restrictions on the number of houses and apartments built on commercial streets with bus service, and very limited restrictions on streets within 1000 feet or so of such streets. By contrast, streets that are not within a short walk of shops can safely be reserved for low-density housing - so density-phobes would actually benefit from this kind of deregulation. In turn, allowing more housing on streets with bus service will make it feasible to increase public transit service. Today, the JTA has no incentive to increase transit service; as long as most of Jacksonville's population (a) does not live anywhere near a bus stop and (b) couldn't safely cross the street even if they did, transit ridership will of course be minimal. But if streets are safer and comfortable for pedestrians, and more people can live within walking distance of those streets, then more people will have the opportunity to avoid high gas prices by taking the bus (and someday, a train or Now of course, all this deregulation and street redesign might not be necessary. Maybe we can drill our way to cheap oil again, or use solar or wind power to restore the days of happy motoring. Or maybe we can rely on the email you just got from Aunt Mabel about how you can use potato peelings to get 100 miles per gallon. But then again, maybe not. In the words of that great urban planner Clint Eastwood, "you've got to ask yourself one question: Do I feel lucky? Well, do ya?"