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UCLA faculty assess the opportunities presented by California's planned high-speed rail system

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As talk continues about a national high-speed rail system, four UCLA faculty members are researching the more local effects on station cities, especially in California.

The \$43 billion California High-Speed Rail was approved by voters in November 2008. Construction is expected to begin in September 2012.

The UCLA faculty are looking into ways that city planning and design can help to revitalize cities that may host a rail station. These benefits could include greater sustainability, economic vitality and stronger communities, said Dana Cuff, a professor of architecture and urban design and planning who is involved with the research.

By researching urban design models from Japan, Germany and China, the team found that high-speed rail could have the most positive implications if stations are located as close to existing cities as possible and are tied to other forms of transportation, including buses and metro systems, Cuff said.

The team also analyzed how cities could capitalize on opportunities from the rail. For example, Cuff said they looked at how conference facilities and attractions could be linked to make the rail a "nexus" of activity.

High-speed rail is the biggest infrastructure investment in the U.S. since the federal interstate highway system in the 1950s, Cuff said. But she worries that the project will replicate earlier mistakes that were made by the federal government.

"The federal interstate system built highways and intersections without thinking about the cities that would develop along them," she said.

This unleashed unexpected consequences like urban sprawl and smog.

"If we had thought more carefully about land use when the federal interstate highways were built ... we would have a different urban landscape today," Cuff said, adding that there could have been more agricultural areas or different locations for schools.

Cuff said the simple action of surrounding a high-speed rail station with parking lots could kill any connection to the surrounding city since people would only drive in and out of the area.

Now, California has the opportunity to introduce a new mode of transportation while considering urban growth beforehand, she said.

Cuff has worked on this project with Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, the associate dean of the School of Public Affairs; Roger Sherman, a UCLA faculty member; and Tim Higgins, a visiting researcher.

The research is funded by Caltrans, the Mineta Transportation Institute and the Haynes Foundation, which supports public policy research, Cuff said.

Sideris said the high-speed rail has the potential to positively affect California, but cities need to prepare for it.

"It's going to link California as a region in a way we've never been linked before," Cuff said.
