The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency voted yesterday to approve a plan banning private automobiles on the downtown stretch of Market Street east of 10th Street. This section, one of the city's busiest, will only be accessible to Muni vehicles, taxis, bicycles, and pedestrians (cars will still be able to cross Market). Commercial loading will be allowed during certain hours, and ride-share zones will be limited to side streets. The city also plans to invest over $600 million to widen sidewalks, build more protected bike lanes, and extend Muni-only lanes.

This is a disruptive measure, in both the traditional and the modern sense. But, if executed properly, it will generate benefits far greater and longer-lasting than any disruption: increased transit ridership and reduced trip times, greater access and safety for bikers and pedestrians, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions from cars. And San Francisco and other California jurisdictions will be able to use the model to accelerate urban design plans that advance climate, development, and neighborhood quality-of-life goals.

San Francisco can look to other major cities' experiences for what to expect with the new Market Street. Earlier this month, New York City began a ban on private automobile use of Manhattan's 14th Street, a highly congested downtown corridor. Preliminary evidence shows significantly faster public transit times, with officials recalibrating transit schedules and residents finding extra time in their days. In 2017, Toronto enacted a similar plan for its downtown King Street, and ridership immediately increased by 17 percent, among other benefits.

Concerns about increased traffic on adjacent streets and reduced business on the transformed corridor are significant, but Toronto appears to have avoided both outcomes and some early reports from New York show business has proceeded apace. While some disabled customers may need direct access to storefronts, anyone who has shopped or worked on Market Street or 14th Street knows that direct arrival in a private car (as opposed to drop-off at a nearby corner, or by transit) is rarely if ever a decisive factor.

Equally important, the plan for Market Street can serve as a basis to explore greater opportunities to transform how we travel on, shop along, and live near our main surface streets. Innovative plans to reform California's transportation corridors with dedicated bus rapid transit lanes and transit-oriented residential development could reduce greenhouse gas emissions, cut transit times, and increase housing construction in already-developed areas—addressing multiple major policy priorities. These "grand boulevard" concepts may be essential to meeting

California’s housing and climate goals, and they share a lot of policy DNA with San Francisco’s new Market Street plan. A Market Street built for transit and pedestrians should fit into a safer, healthier, and more enjoyable San Francisco. As state leaders hunt for ways to achieve those climate and housing goals, they will do well to consider the benefits of rebalancing how we use our shared streets.