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Driving toward zero cars: 5 questions with Parkmerced Labs' new innovation leader

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San Francisco's biggest residential community developer thinks taking drivers out of the Bay Area commuting equation can go a long way toward solving housing problems.

Earlier this year, Parkmerced owner and developer Maximus Real Estate Partners launched an innovation lab dedicated to partnering with companies to address urban living issues. Parkmerced Labs would focus on energy technology, building technology, a connected environment and transportation, the company said in its press release.



Parkmerced wants to move people away from single-occupancy vehicles to more sustainable options.

In May, Parkmerced Labs partnered with Uber to offer residents a subsidy for use toward rides to Daly City and Balboa Park BART stations and West Portal Muni station. The car-free living program also provides \$100 credit to new residents to use on Uber or to have added to their Clipper cards.

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In September, Parkmerced Labs brought in former sustainability consultant Stephen Linaweaver as partner. Linaweaver plans to grow the lab along with other developments.

"Our first goal is to provide as many resources on transportation as we can, and then we want to look at the other verticals: smart homes, energy technology and what other renewable energies we can roll out," he said.

"Parkmerced is special because it is home to a community of 10,000 residents from diverse backgrounds, with great proximity to transit, green space and the Pacific Ocean, all on one 152-acre site that is larger than some entire S.F. neighborhoods."

The city approved Parkmerced redevelopment plans back in 2011 and juggled almost three years of legal battles with developers before agreeing to move forward on adding 5,000 living units and additional office and retail spaces to the neighborhood.

Its grand plan to transform the area of 3,200 units and 10,000 residents in multiple phases over the next 20 years — not just by adding fancy new buildings and greenery, but by actually figuring out an efficient way for residents to get to and from their homes to destinations.

Located just south of San Francisco State University by Lake Merced, the complexes aren't the easiest to get to currently. Transportation improvements proposed included rerouting the Muni Metro M line to run through the development, as well as offer shuttles to BART stations.

Linaweaver spoke to the Business Times about how Parkmerced can reach its goal of a zero-car community.

What do you bring to the new role at Parkmerced Labs?

My background is sustainability and tech. Parkmerced Labs is looking to test solutions now. First and foremost is the transportation and providing that as a service. Beyond that, it's combining hardware and software to make apartment use very intuitive. We're thinking creatively about how we generate energy in a way that reduces emissions and increases quality of life.

How is the car-free living program going?

The success of the program has been providing residents with a choice. It's got to be intuitive and very easy to use for the residents. There's a way to rethink urban apartment living. The goal in terms of transport is to get as many trips as possible to be taken via walking, biking, public transit or shared-vehicle rides. In order to get to that point we need to avoid single-occupancy trips in cars and encourage people to sell their cars or forego the purchase of a new one. As development in the Bay Area increases in density and we have more transit-oriented development, we will see more of this across the Bay Area.

There are limitations to Caltrain and BART, of course, but I do think this is a trend we will see beyond San Francisco. Self-driving cars, if they are electric cars providing shared rides, could really help address congestion and climate challenges.

What do you mean by a smart home?

Smart homes means increasing efficiency. If you think about leaving your hotel room, your key comes out and it turns out your lights. Our homes should do the same. Everything should turn on when you want it to and need it to. Developments like that and machine learning, the combination of these things can help us achieve your energy efficiency goals.

What kind of transportation tech are you most excited about?

Machine learning for self-driving vehicles. If a new driver of a vehicle learns to not change lanes with another vehicle in their blind spot, one person has learned that lesson. If a connected, self-driving vehicle learns that lesson, thousands of other connected vehicles can learn at the same time. The positive implications for safety are significant.

How do you envision a sustainable city?

If we're going to create a sustainable city, if you look in the next 30 to 50 years ... there will be population growth and we need to serve those c

shop live and work in the same areas, that requires a lot of planning on the developmental side. I envision a renaissance place that we're starting to see a little bit of. That will only increase. Transportation is going to be key to that. Some of the San Francisco neighborhoods are really quite close to that. As far as North American cities, Vancouver is a great goal to aspire to. The Bay Area is so regional and spread out, so it's going to be a challenge.

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