Car fixation shouldn’t determine plans

BY LEONARD SCHOPPA

Our community is facing a series of big decisions on land use and zoning issues that will shape our transportation options and lifestyles for years to come. Unfortunately, the discussion we are having has been constrained by our inability to imagine a future that is different from the auto-dominated one that has transformed our community over the last 50 years.

The Daily Progress provided a nice illustration of our clouded vision in a editorial headline “Parking laws, ideal or real?” (July 11). Critiquing Charlottesville’s plan to allow dense housing development with fewer parking places near the university, the editorial questioned whether students “who are young enough to want freedom and mobility above many other values” would ever give up their cars, which are their “literal vehicle(s) of freedom.”

This idea that automobiles embody the American value of freedom is certainly the received wisdom in our culture. When we look at transportation policy alternatives in my classes on comparative public policy, students invariably make the point that the unusually heavy reliance on automobile transportation in this country reflects American cultural values that equate the sports car moving at high speeds on the open road as the embodiment of freedom.

It’s difficult to get beyond these entrenched images, but that doesn’t mean we have to be captive to their allure. For many people, an automobile-centric community does not provide “freedom.”

Let’s start with the elderly, who are growing in number as the baby boomers start to retire. Although we all hope this day won’t come, deteriorating sight and slowing reflexes will eventually leave many of us unable to drive safely on our streets and highways. For those of us who have already reached this point, a community and intercity transportation system that is organized almost exclusively around the automobile does not provide much “freedom.”

And more and more of our older citizens find themselves trapped at home, unable to get out without relying on friends or family members to come by and give them a ride. Other advanced-industrialized societies provide elderly citizens with a safe and reliable alternative: public buses, light rail and intercity rail. Our community provides bus service only once an hour in most parts of Charlottesville and not at all in many of the newer housing developments in the urban ring. Think about it. If you suddenly were unable to drive because of deteriorating health, would our transportation system give you much freedom?

Next let’s consider our younger citizens, the 10- to 15-year-olds who are eager to explore the community, participate in activities in various parts of town and get together with friends. Right now, most of these kids have no choice but to rely on their parents for rides in the minivan or SUV. But many of us still can’t afford the cost of keeping a car on the road; the cost of making car payments, buying insurance, keeping the car repaired and buying gasoline often add up to more than a single mother can afford on a low-wage job.

These citizens too are confined by a community structure that leaves them with few ways of getting around other than sporadic and lengthy bus rides. Lacking dedicated lanes, our buses are forced to wait in rush hour traffic with everyone else and weave in and out of parking lots up U.S. 29 north of Charlottesville, forcing someone who wants to get from West Main to Wal-Mart to sit on the bus for 45 minutes or more each way. Our auto-centric community doesn’t provide these citizens with much freedom.

We need to fudge the image of the sports car on the open road, and we will realize that true freedom lies in land use and transportation decisions that give us choices: healthy choices, cheap choices, clean choices and choices that are open to the young and the old.

Once we understand where true freedom lies, we will realize that zoning rules that encourage greater density around the university, which means more people walking and using public transit, must be a priority to provide all of us with more freedom.

We’ve been investing heavily in the dreams of the sports car on the open road for 50 years — only to find that it doesn’t really bring us freedom. It’s time we started investing in a new dream.