A new vision for El Camino Real

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One hundred years ago this week, then-California Highway Commission Chairman Burton Towne, with a dozen other officials looking on, jabbed a shovel into the earth on a dusty section of El Camino Real near San Bruno Avenue, formally breaking ground in San Bruno on the first segment of state highway to be paved.

It was a transforming, almost revolutionary, moment for the "Royal Road" that heralded the opening of statewide road construction and ushered in the era of the automobile in California.

People no longer had to rely on a transportation system run by others, scheduled by others. They could get into their own cars and go wherever they wanted, whenever they wanted. It may be unsurpassed as a moment of liberation and individual independence.

It also made possible the housing and building boom that created the Peninsula and Silicon Valley. But along the way, El Camino lost its way.

What once might have been a unifying roadway instead has become a disparate and unfocused corridor, a mixture of urban and suburban sprawl.

Travel El Camino Real from Daly City to San Jose, and in any single stretch you will see shopping malls, strip malls, aging apartment complexes and vibrant or struggling downtown
business districts. Mostly you will see a disconnected array of owner-occupied businesses that run the gamut from treasured local restaurants and retail businesses to fast-food franchises, head shops and porn stores.

The roadway can be a highway-style six lanes wide, where pedestrians cross at significant risk. It can be a metropolitan thoroughfare of four lanes with handsomely landscaped median strips.

But just as a century ago, when El Camino was largely known as the California Mission Trail, there is once again a vision to transform the roadway. It is the Grand Boulevard Initiative.

The Grand Boulevard Initiative, which we are honored to chair, is made up of people involved in government and industry - business leaders, elected officials, environmentalists, developers, public agencies - who believe that this historic road can be a vibrant corridor that serves our communities well.

Each of the 19 cities along El Camino Real in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties has its own vision for the future of the corridor. The goal of the initiative is to preserve each community's distinctive character while pursuing a common goal to transform El Camino, even as it remains a critical regional roadway for automobiles.

Those common goals are captured in the initiative's 10 guiding principles, which embody a modern vision for better living - that is, walkable, pedestrian-friendly communities, well served by transit and connected to vibrant commercial centers. The vision is to make El Camino Real into a grand boulevard of meaningful destinations.

What this envisions is new commercial centers, ranging from small, neighborhood shops to large, regional malls, clustered at places well served by transit. It seeks to encourage natural gathering places, rather than stringing out services along miles and miles of often traffic-clogged roadway that is uninviting and disconnected from the communities it crosses.

In the place of this commercial clutter, the initiative would see new apartments, green open spaces, bike paths and bus lines. So the popular taco stand is likely to remain - that would be up to each city - but its location might change to cluster it with other shops and eating places.

Now, the hard work - as revolutionary as the paving of the highway in 1912 - begins. Back then, it took public support - public demand, really - for a new way of living in our communities. So it will again.

We need community members to appear before their respective city councils and assure elected officials that this transformation has public support and that the vision is widely shared.

These are your communities. Get involved with making El Camino a world-class boulevard.

Express your view

The Grand Boulevard Initiative has begun the Friends of the Grand Boulevard.
Add your voice and learn more at grandboulevard.net.

Michael Scanlon is CEO of SamTrans, and Russell Hancock is CEO of Joint Venture Silicon Valley. This article has been corrected since it appeared in print editions.