Response to “Value of Urban Streets”

This reading was interesting to me because I had never thought of how our overbuilt street system negatively affects land values. I am familiar with how parking raises the cost of housing and has lead to unbundling and other strategies to separate its cost, but for some reason never thought of streets in the same way. The finding that streets take up 19% of the land area in Los Angeles County is pretty shocking. I think the use of GIS tax parcel data is a great idea for accurately measuring streets. I used to work in Zoning and permitted houses, so I used to look at parcel maps all day. I know from experience that the dedicated right-of-way is often completely different than what you see on the ground, at least in San Diego County. Most of the roads I came across were dedicated as 40’ wide, and property owners were always shocked that the ROW went 10 more feet into their property than they thought. However, one response I have based on my own experience is that in many jurisdictions, building setbacks are taken from the centerline of the road. This means that if a parcel had a 30’ front yard setback, the buildable area (and thus value of potential improvements on the land) wouldn’t change whether the road was 40’ or 50’ wide. So, I think that narrowing streets would have to be paired with changes in zoning policies in order to realize any change in value.

Questions:

Did you leave in areas in the right-of way that are not for vehicle travel, such as landscaped medians or at-grade light rail stations?

This is more of a comment than a question, but isn’t a reason why streets are so wide because they often have utilities on or beneath them? In a scenario where streets are significantly narrowed, would it negatively impact property values if they had tons of utility easements that you can’t build on top of?