If people drive fewer miles, will policies from zoning to energy change to reflect a shift away from the culture of the car? The latest figures from the federal Department of Transportation (DOT) say miles driven in Minnesota in December 2008 were down 3.3 percent when compared with the year before.

That follows a 5 percent slide in November. Historically, miles driven usually increase when gas prices are low, but the number continued to fall in Minnesota even as gas prices dipped in November and December.

Eric Sundquist, a University of Wisconsin energy and transportation policy analyst with the *Center on Wisconsin Strategy*
, says if the recent mileage downturn becomes a trend, major policy changes could result. Looking at a Google Earth image of a major city clearly shows how car-centric Americans have become, he adds.

"There are just little dots of buildings surrounded by asphalt. Nobody can really walk from building to building because it's so far and unpleasant."

One benefit of fewer miles driven, Sundquist says, is less need for wider expanses of land to be paved to accommodate ever-expanding hunger for more parking. If the number of miles driven continues to drop, policy makers could change zoning laws to require less paving and parking, he points out, and more resources could be devoted to walking and public transportation.

"If you have a walkable neighborhood, you should be able to lower the amount of pavement and make everything more compact because you're going to have less parking."

Sundquist says a less car-centric society also could affect basic notions of how cities are designed.

"There are ways to build good, compact neighborhoods that don't bring back memories of 1890 and tenements and other things that sometimes concern people when they think about density."

The entire DOT report can be found at www.fhwa.dot.gov .