

Transit-Oriented Community Development

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The St. Louis region has invested over \$1.5 billion in a 46-mile light rail system that stretches from Scott Air Force Base in Illinois to Lambert Airport and Shrewsbury. Little transit-oriented development (TOD), however, has been built around the 37 stations. This is huge lost opportunity for the region. It is time to jumpstart TOD and link it to comprehensive community development.

TOD is relatively dense, mixed-use development (residential, retail, and commercial) located within about a 10-minute walk of transit stations. There is a fair amount of TAD (transit-adjacent development) in the region (think of the Central West End, Brentwood I-64, or Emerson Park), but little TOD. True TOD requires features that maximize transit use and walking, such as limited parking and well-designed public spaces centered around the station.

In a sprawled out region like St. Louis developers are used to building at low densities on cheap land. But smaller households, empty nesters, and those seeking an active lifestyle are creating a growing market for denser, pedestrian friendly environments. 87 percent of the population gains in the City of St. Louis between 2000 and 2010 were in pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods near transit stations (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/nextstl/6896598777/sizes/l/in/photostream/>).

Citizens for Modern Transit (CMT) has been pushing TOD for over a decade and their efforts are finally starting to pay off. Clayton has passed a TOD overlay zoning district. Metro hired a new VP, John Langa, who understands that transit can be a catalyst for economic development. Funds from the \$4.6 million HUD grant to create a Regional Plan for Sustainable Development (<http://www.ewgateway.org/rpsd/>) are being used to plan for TOD.

What makes TOD so attractive is that it satisfies the triple bottom line, or what is sometimes called the three E's: efficiency, environment, equity. TOD is efficient because it puts housing, jobs, and shopping in close proximity, reducing energy consumption. By promoting walking and public transit, TOD reduces auto trips and greenhouse gas emissions.

The ability of TOD to improve equity, however, is often overlooked. Transportation is a huge burden on low-income households. Because of the sprawled out nature of the region, families spend more on transportation than they do on housing. According to the American Automobile Association, the average cost of owning a car in the United States was \$8,773 in

2011. Many low-income families with two earners could dispense with one car if they lived near a transit station, increasing their discretionary income by thousands of dollars a year.

Why has there been so little TOD? Part of the reason is that the original MetroLink line was built along an existing rail bed that was not conducive to TOD. The Cross-County extension is better situated but it goes through neighborhoods that are pretty much completely built out. The passage of Prop A in 2010 generates about \$75 million annually – about \$40 million could be used to build a new line. An 18-month planning study, released in 2008, identified the “locally preferred alternative” as the North-South extension out of downtown (see map below). The route travels north out of downtown on North Florissant, west on Natural Bridge and then north on Goodfellow. The southern route runs down Jefferson Avenue to I-55 where it follows the I-55 highway right-of-way to the Bayless Avenue interchange.

A new North-South line could spur badly needed development in battered neighborhoods of north and south St. Louis. Because any new line will need federal funding and the federal New Starts program for light rail expansion gives higher priority to projects that would spur development, especially in disadvantaged areas, the North-South expansion should be the next line built in the region. East-West Gateway has determined that the next step for the North-South line would be an environmental assessment that would cost about \$3 million. The City of St. Louis needs to raise the local match in order to complete the assessment and put the North-South extension in the cue for federal funding.

We need to start planning now for TOD along the new North-South line. Citizens should be engaged in the planning process to choose where the stations will go and a fund should be established to bank land around the transit stations for future TOD. TOD projects with affordable workforce housing should be given greater priority for subsidies, such as TIFs and Low-Income Housing Tax Credits. Mixed-income TOD would not only lift up disadvantaged neighborhoods but spur economic development for the entire region.

