

# A Sustainable Approach to Urban Life: Transit-Oriented Development

BY KATE SHIRLEY

A convenient and sustainable lifestyle choice called transit-oriented development has been making a resurgence in recent decades. This urban planning strategy centers around creating compact livable communities which include places to work, live, play, learn and relax for people of all ages and incomes, all within close proximity to a centrally-located public transit center.

Transit-oriented development is an effective way to overcome modern problems like burgeoning urban populations, gridlocked roadways, increasing air pollution and rising fuel prices, but this lifestyle trend is hardly new. Mixed-use development has flourished in many older cities worldwide, but fell out of favor in the mid-20th century as automobile use proliferated and long distance travel by car became more feasible. Once the Interstate Highway System was constructed, newer cities became spread out and suburban, and land uses were segregated according to their function, with housing, commercial and recreational land separated by long distances.

Land-intensive community development that promotes car use is increasingly perceived as incompatible with creating vibrant urban neighborhoods. Many dense urban environments simply do not have the necessary land space to support the required infrastructure, such as multiple lane highways and expansive parking facilities. For this reason, many cities and towns have been trending towards a transit-oriented development philosophy. These communities surround a downtown core that contains ample public transit options, mixed-use development with shops, schools, parks, office buildings, public services and a variety of affordable housing options all within convenient walking or cycling distance.

In addition to the benefits and efficiencies in using transit-oriented development for city planning, there are indications that tastes in housing are changing. With the recent economic crisis that was linked, in part, to a housing bubble and a glut of subprime mortgages, the American dream of owning a large house has become increasingly out of reach for the struggling

end through additional revenues generated by increased property taxes. Furthermore, the improvements at transit stations and the surrounding neighborhoods have been shown to create a positive effect that leads to urban renewal and economic development in these newly accessible areas. These neighborhoods tend to have less commercial property vacancies and residents find them to be more desirable, accessible and affordable places to live.



Collingwood Village in Vancouver, Canada

middle class. According to the Wall Street Journal, median prices of condos topped those of single-family homes in 2005, which was the ninth consecutive year of record condo sales. Owning large homes in the suburbs, far away from where jobs, school and civic services are located, is less popular now than ever.

Transit-oriented development can also help stimulate a local economy. The commercial centers at the core of these developments benefit from an engaged local population, better walkability and increased transportation options into the area. Typically, property values increase by five to fifteen percent. This allows the project to be partially funded on the back

In order to justify frequent, convenient transit service and create a vibrant community street life, some general density guidelines can be helpful when planning a transit-oriented community. An ideal transit-oriented neighborhood with light rail service should contain at least nine residential units per gross acre in residential areas and 35-50 million sq. ft. commercial or office space. The downtown city core of a transit-oriented community should contain high-density residential and commercial development in buildings that are at least four stories, and be

surrounded by a variety of lower-density housing options like single-family homes, with some apartment buildings and commercial lots as needed.

Also of vital importance is convenience in terms proximity to services. Studies have shown that people are willing to walk a quarter mile to ride a bus, and about a half mile to access a rail station. And part of maintaining a successful transit-oriented development is cultivating an inviting and safe street life. Streetscape improvements are a crucial component of transit-oriented development. Pleasant, well-lit and appropriately shaded streets with ample sidewalk space can go a long way toward encouraging people to get out of their cars and walk or use a bicycle instead. A

reduction in per capita motor vehicle use is another important benefit, as transit-oriented neighborhoods tend to emit less greenhouse gases.

Many cities in the United States and Canada have been prioritizing transit-oriented development. Denver, Montreal, San Francisco and Vancouver are examples of cities that have developed policies which aim to reduce motorized vehicle traffic and emissions in favor of close-knit livable communities with a focus on public transit.

Vancouver has been recognized for developing successful communities around its SkyTrain lines. One such project is Collingwood Village, a high-density urban village on 28 acres of land that is centered around the Joyce-Collingwood SkyTrain station. Now a mix of high-density housing, shops and parks, the area once was home to industrial buildings and an active rail yard. These uses eventually declined, making the large amount of land needed for the Collingwood community easy to acquire and prime for development, once the city rezoned it for high-density residential. The

community has 2,700 residential units within 16 buildings, and 70,000 sq. ft. of non-residential space that includes a grocery store, drug store, elementary school, community center and a small-scale retail center.

In California's San Francisco Bay Area, local and regional governments have been encouraging transit-oriented development along the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system. The goal is to address concerns regarding traffic congestion, preserve natural areas, promote public health and increase the variety of housing options available to residents.

Twenty years ago, the Bay Area city of Hayward, California was home to struggling businesses and empty parking lots. The city recognized the need to try a transit-oriented strategy, and proposed revitalizing the downtown area through its Core Action Plan. Within next ten years, the city had developed 700 new housing units, as well as retail and commercial space that includes a supermarket, retail shops, as well as dining and entertainment options, all within walking distance of the Hayward BART stop. Further

development is planned for an area just west of Hayward's downtown core, which will bring an additional 850 housing units within walking distance of BART and Amtrak stations, as well as an elementary school.

Creating vibrant, livable, high-density urban communities through transit-oriented development is a sustainable way to encourage a better quality of life for city residents by promoting affordable housing, reducing automobile traffic, and improving air quality and access to public services. Utilizing smart growth practices like transit-oriented development is a sustainable way to achieve these goals for urban dwellers from all walks of life.

### References

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