

QUICKNOTES

*Planning fundamentals
for public officials and
engaged citizens*

This PAS QuickNotes was prepared by John V. Thomas and Stephanie Bertaina, senior policy analyst and policy analyst with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Planning for Transit-Oriented Development

WHAT IS TOD?

Transit-oriented development, commonly known as TOD, is more than just more densely arranged homes, offices, and stores near a rail station or bus line. Successful TOD is defined by activities and urban design features that generate ridership for a transit system as well as tangible benefits for a community. The role of planning is to balance multiple interests and lay the groundwork for building high-quality places. In the case of TOD planning, making transit use safe and convenient are critical aspects of quality.

Another way to understand TOD is to consider what it is not. In other words, TOD is more than just dense development around a major transit station. Being transit-oriented also implies pedestrian-friendly design, the right mix of land-use types, compact development consistent with neighborhood character, and well-designed parking opportunities.

Although encouraging more development within an easy walking distance is important, density alone does not ensure increased ridership. High-rise buildings surrounded by large surface parking lots or separated from transit by high-volume, high-speed roads may not produce significant transit ridership, even if homes and offices are within a short walking distance.

A mix of uses is also important to generating ridership and a quality sense of place. For residential TOD projects, locating retail and service businesses near transit significantly enhances the convenience of taking transit. According to some experts, a greater presence of such activities near a station almost always means that people will be willing to walk longer distances between home and the station from the surrounding neighborhoods. In other words, stations with more activities associated with living, working, and playing have a broader reach.

THE BENEFITS OF GETTING TOD RIGHT

When done well, TOD creates many benefits, including ensuring more cost-effective transit investment by increasing ridership. People living in TODs are five times more likely to use transit compared to other households in their region. In addition to ridership, TOD provides economic benefits to the community. Dallas's light-rail line has already drawn over \$800 million in commercial and residential projects within walking distance of the stations. Arlington County, Virginia, estimates that station areas occupy only eight percent of their land but generate 33 percent of their tax base. Successful TOD projects create a sense of place connected to transportation choices.

PLANNING FOR TOD FROM START TO FINISH

The critical question for planners and local elected officials is: What should be done at various stages of planning and development approval to produce these outcomes? Although the answer is complicated, some basic principles and best practices can provide a solid place to begin.

One basic rule of TOD planning is that context matters. One planning approach does not fit all circumstances. Although planners are accustomed to hearing this message, it has a specific meaning in this case. Any station area or transit corridor is defined by basic features that shape market dynamics. These features, in turn, shape the strategies and policies that are most appropriate. For example, the impact of transit services on the potential for new development and the ability of TOD to generate ridership vary widely and planners must consider the nature of the transit service, the regional context, and neighborhood context.



John V. Thomas

Anchored by a library and public plaza, with a vibrant public space and access to the nearby Metrorail station, the Rockville Town Center project near Washington, D.C., has enhanced the downtown civic environment and created a strong sense of place.



American Planning Association

Making Great Communities Happen

Considering community concerns in the TOD planning process is also critical. In some neighborhoods, proposed TOD projects may not differ substantially from the existing density and character. For example, many suburbs already have commercial buildings and some higher density residential development. In such communities, converting a parking lot or other underutilized parcels into a multistory mixed use project would be less controversial than in a suburb with primarily single-family detached homes. However, many bedroom communities are evolving as their metropolitan areas grow and many have the market conditions needed to create attractive town centers anchored around a rail station.

Displacement and gentrification may be another critical area of community concern. In communities with strong redevelopment potential and socially and economically diverse populations, TOD planning must ensure all residents benefit from new investment. Tools such as density bonuses tied to affordable housing requirements, community benefits agreements, and incentives to attract employment-generating uses can be particularly valuable to these communities.

Another fundamental rule for TOD is to plan for the long term. A vision for a station area should be developed not only for a five-year project timeline, but also to define what policies and regulations are needed to ensure project success over a 10- to 20-year period. This principle is particularly important for the station area planning and visioning stage.

TOD PLANNING, IMPLEMENTATION, AND EVALUATION

Success at the project scale is more likely when a solid foundation is established at the station area and regional scales. While short- and long-term planning is important to lay the groundwork for TOD, planning alone is not enough to ensure success. For example, station area planning is most effective when it is connected to a process that ensures comprehensive plan elements or zoning regulations are consistent with planned development. Such advanced planning also provides the analytical and public process needed to make changes. Finally, the tools and policies to implement TOD, such as infrastructure, land assembly, and financial incentives, will be more successful if those tools are coherently related to a larger planning process.

An often overlooked aspect of successful transit-oriented development programs is post development monitoring and evaluation. Such an evaluation should include revisiting the intended benefits and key outcomes, and communicating the benefits to the public and decision makers.

PRINCIPLES FOR CREATING GREAT TRANSIT-ORIENTED PLACES

The following guiding principles can help ensure the quality of great transit-oriented places:

1. Maximize ridership through appropriate development.
2. Generate meaningful community involvement.
3. Design streets for all users.
4. Create opportunities for affordable and accessible living.
5. Make great public spaces.
6. Manage parking effectively.
7. Capture the value of transit.
8. Maximize neighborhood and station connectivity.
9. Implement the plan and evaluate its success. ☐

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