

TRAVELS THROUGH A TRANSIT FRIENDLY REGION PART I: A RIDE IN THE COUNTRY

Transit-friendly design has become a well accepted and well-worn mantra, the first principle of which is that new development should be within a ¼mile walk of a transit stop. The problem is that over the past thirty years, population has grown in the tri-state region by 13%, but land consumption only by 60%. The reality is that the vast majority of the region is settled in patterns, and at densities that do not support transit of any kind. Much of the rest of the region can support alternative modes including buses, commuter shuttles to employment centers, or strategic connections to ferries and other modes. Given this there are a number of considerations for transit in low-density environments.

Suburban design does matter

Suburban development is characterized by a host of typologies that are normally associated with sprawl. This includes stand-alone office buildings or groups of office buildings, strip commercial centers and gated residential communities. Even if these same settlement types, driven by the marketplace, continue to be the norm, details of their site planning can make a difference for transit effectiveness—whatever the mode. For example, office buildings and shopping centers can be laid out in such a way that there is a safe and reasonably short pedestrian way between the entrances of buildings and a transit stop along the fronting arterial. This may mean reconfiguring parking lots and trying to control the amount of parking in the front of the building. The transit stop itself must provide many of the same kinds of amenities associated with transit in centers—a well-identified, clean, safe and sheltered environment.

Inter-modal connections are essential

Although extremely high densities are required to support heavy and light rail, there are often unexploited or unexplored opportunities to connect to other modes. Some of these are being rediscovered, including new ferry service connections to the Hudson line such as that from Haverstraw. In other circumstances, the services exist but are not coordinated among the different providers. There are situations, for example where local bus service does not meet arriving and departing trains in a consistent matter, often just missing connections. Better on-going coordination among providers is essential to take advantage of the transit infrastructure that already exists in the outer suburbs.

Even in lower density environment transit and new development are linked

As MetroNorth's recent experience in Wassaic, NY, illustrates, transit service can have an impact on land values even in rural environments. In that case, the Harlem Line was extended to a new park-and-ride facility on the outskirts of the hamlet, to serve a growing commuter population but also weekenders who found that this part of the Harlem Valley was their gateway to the Berkshires. Economic models showed that property values would increase and in fact there has been new development both in the Wassaic area and in the two communities to the south. RPA's own studies of the existing zoning and master plan documents showed that there was the potential for new sprawl development to take place as a result, including new strip highway development along nearby Route 22 and new gated residential communities. However, the study also showed that with the right land use controls, the station area could be an asset by stimulating new development that could complement the existing Hamlet and make new connections between the park and ride, the hamlet and a planned conference center nearby.

PART II: A RIDE TO THE CENTER

The proposition that new development should be in existing centers, where infrastructure and access to transit already exist, is fundamental. And yet, resistance to increased density and obstacles to small-scale in-fill development thwarts this strategy in most of the region. Recent experiences with “transit-friendly design” in the New York region raises a number of issues for consideration.

There is reflex of resistance to increased residential development in existing centers

The impacts of new housing on existing communities are poorly understood. The working assumption is that new housing will bring with it more children, requiring school expansion and increased taxes. In fact, this is not necessarily the case. Revenues depend on the ownership model (is it rental, coop or fee simple). The number of school-age children generated depends on a number of factors of which unit size is only one (for example, is it a kid-friendly environment with parks nearby?) In fact, new residential development near train stations tends to be in attached configurations—everything from apartments to townhouses—a market that attracts not families with children, but more often singles or couples without children who are looking for a easy commute to work. (Avalon Bay’s recent experience indicates that the market is also for “empty nesters” from the same community.) More significantly, even if the new units can accommodate children, the net impact can still be positive. This was found to be the case in the preliminary analysis of the Hastings-on-Hudson waterfront plan where 250 new units would add sixty children to the school district, but where the net tax revenues exceeded new school-related cost by a factor of almost three.

Land-use goals and transit ridership may conflict

Unfortunately, the land-use goals of the community and the land-use goals of the transit providers often work at cross-purposes. The community will want to chase “ratables”—to promote commercial development to increase their tax base, avoid impacts on the schools from new children and hoping that the new induced traffic will be offset by transit service. The transit provider will want to promote housing, because this will generate the greatest number of new commuter trips to the Central Business District. This was found to be the case in one community where RPA studied the redevelopment of underutilized properties near a suburban train station. RPA found that one million square feet of new commercial development would generate 1,400 new automobile trips because it was unlikely that more than 7% of the workers would arrive by train. On the other hand, the same amount of new residential development would generate only one quarter as many new car trips in the peak our. These kinds of land-use decisions are being played-out across the region although communities often do not understand the real impacts of either residential or commercial development.

Development practices do not favor small-scale in-fill development

There are a number of reasons for this that touch on everything from development practices to the American psyche. The new larger-scale development models, a result of the ascendancy of real estate investment trusts (REIT’s), are not calibrated to the more complex and fine grained scale of infill development. Small and medium scale speculative development in town centers has lost out to the investment manager’s requirement for a firm commitment from a single large tenant. This is why, for example, in Stamford, Connecticut, two or three prime office sites within ¼miles of a regional transportation hub remain vacant. Also, the lenders for development projects, who are no longer local stakeholders, refuse to experiment with the complex mixed-use projects that require exceptions to conservative “rules of thumb” about things like parking requirements and flexible use ordinances. The success of transit development in centers will depend on addressing larger institutional issues.