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Gathering Place

Cliff Slater

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Transit-oriented development not a panacea for our communities

Transit-oriented developments (TODs) proponents envision building or redeveloping higher-density sustainable communities around rail stations that are to be pedestrian-oriented with mixed retail, workplace and residential components together. This provides vibrant communities where people can work, play and live.

There is far less need for automobiles or parking space, since all activities are within walking distance of the rail station. It increases transit ridership, decreases automobile use and thereby reduces traffic congestion.

However, the reality is far different in places that have TODs.

First, the public does not generally value the “higher density, vibrant neighborhood” features of TODs. We know that because home buyers and retailers will not pay the full costs of the apartments, houses and shops that have been built. To make them saleable, taxpayers have had to provide heavy subsidies.

TODs are now often being touted as a major reason for building rail transit even though there are no TODs that are not heavily subsidized. Are our planners and elected officials proposing heavily subsidizing rail transit in order to heavily subsidize TODs? You gotta love the way these folks think.

The problem here is that planners are looking backward, not forward, with rail transit and TODs. For example, rail transit took off in the late 19th century, before there were automobiles, with the advent of electrically powered rail transit. Rapid expansion followed until ridership peaked in 1923 stymied by the growth of automobile ownership. From then on, rail transit ridership declined to today’s levels that, in riders as a percent of city populations, is only 5 percent of what it once was.ⁱ

TOD websites often show images of old European inner cities with small stores and living quarters over them.ⁱⁱ In those days the problem was also congestion – people congestion. Planners, needing to improve the health of the population, looked for a way to provide “dispersal,” now known pejoratively as “sprawl” and rail transit was the answer.

With city populations somewhat dispersed by the early 1900s, we were commuting on rail transit to the city center for work and then, once back home, we shopped at the corner grocery. The children walked to school and we adults did not play or exercise that much.

It was the advent of the family automobile and the paved highway that changed our lives so dramatically.

Today, since the first automobile-oriented shopping mall opened in 1923, the supermarkets of the 1950s, the shopping centers of the 1960s, to the big box stores of today, we no longer shop at corner stores. And we go to exercise class, drive our children to school (public or private), and drive them to soccer games..

This is why when we examine the effects of existing Mainland TODs we find, for example, that those in Portland have had little impact on commuting. The percentage using public transportation of any kind there is 6 percent, down from 7 percent before rail or TODs.ⁱⁱⁱ And two-thirds of those commuters use the bus, not rail.^{iv}

And the percentage is the key factor. A 100,000 population increase in the work force means that 80,000 more will commute by car while only 6,000 more will use transit of any kind.^v So, unsurprisingly, Portland had the 17th worst increase in traffic congestion in the nation for 1982-2005.^{vi}

The dawning realization that “Smart Growth,” TODs and the like are not so ‘smart’ is occurring across the political spectrum. For example, the Progressive Policy Institute, an affiliate of the Democrat Leadership Council, has the following in their *Politics of Gridlock*:

The anti-auto coalition through masterful use of rhetoric and oversimplified analysis, have succeeded in dramatically influencing not just federal, state, and local policies, but the entire orientation of the transportation debate. Terms like “smart growth,” “increasing access to choices instead of building freeways,” and “sustainable, holistic solutions” sound great. Yet these are code words that mask an anti-automobile, anti-highway agenda.^{vii}

These anti-highway “Smart Growth” policies are being surreptitiously promoted by planning and political alliances without much awareness on the public’s part of what is going on. These social-engineering policies are damaging to our quality of life if allowed to progress.

Cliff Slater chairs HONOLULUTRAFFIC.COM where the footnoted version of this may be found.

ⁱ <http://lava.net/cslater/TQOrigin.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.newurbanism.org/pedestrian.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ctpp/jtw/jtw4.htm> Exhibit 4.12

^{iv} <http://www.trimet.org/publications/index.htm#planning>

^v That is only if the percentage of transit commuters holds up. Across the nation only one metro area was able to hold it level during 1980-2000 and that was San Diego. All other U.S. metro areas experienced a decline in the percentage of commuter use of public transit. See federal government data at: <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ctpp/jtw/jtw4.htm> Exhibit 4.12.

^{vi} Source: Texas Transportation Institute’s Urban Mobility Study. page 40 http://mobility.tamu.edu/ums/congestion_data/tables/national/table_5.pdf

^{vii} http://www.ppionline.org/documents/Atkinson_092004.pdf