It's been a given for several years that transit planners should always focus on the link between land use and transportation when conducting transit corridor projects. The Federal Transit Administration started emphasizing the transit-land use connection in its New Starts program more than a decade ago, and that emphasis is even stronger today with the requirement that New Starts applicants complete a detailed land-use template. Project applicants can get 'bonus points' for transit-supportive development plans near proposed rail stations; that 'extra credit' often can help boost a project's New Starts rating.

Recent events, however, have made the transit-land use linkage even stronger, The spike in gasoline prices and the increased cost of commuting have made individuals and whole communities re-think their attitudes toward transit and land use. An additional factor is the bursting of the housing bubble; some recent studies have shown that homes located near transit stations have held their value much better than those located in non-transit areas. Those factors, coupled with an emphasis on climate change and reducing carbon footprints, have created a 'critical mass' that has made transit-oriented or transit-supportive development a major focus of local planning efforts as local citizens look for opportunities to live and work closer to transit stations.

Many mature transit communities are playing catch-up; they have had major transit investments in place for several years and are only now trying to retrofit many station areas to accommodate the increased demand for development near transit stations. However, some communities are planning for the future by comprehensively combining their corridor planning efforts with a sincere commitment to encouraging development near future stations.

One good example of the latter is occurring in Fort Worth, Texas. The Fort Worth Transportation Authority (The T) has operated the Trinity Railway Express (TRE) as a joint project with Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) for several years. That commuter rail system links downtown Fort Worth with downtown Dallas, with several intermediate stops in adjoining suburbs.

In 2005, The T's board of directors completed its strategic plan. One of that plan's...
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Station review meetings allow stakeholders a chance to look at the opportunities for TOD.

major tenets was the proposal to have Tarrant County's second commuter rail system in operation within four to 10 years. Soon after, The T undertook the Southwest-to-Northeast Rail Corridor project (also known by the catchy name SW2NE Rail) to help move that vision forward. The T completed an alternatives analysis in 2006, with the agency's board approving a preliminary Locally Preferred Alternative focused on a 37-mile-long rail corridor.

The corridor links southwest Fort Worth with downtown (and a transfer to the TRE line if needed), the rapidly growing northeastern side of Tarrant County, downtown grapevine and Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport. It would provide access to major activity and employment centers along the corridor, including the Texas Christian University neighborhood, the city’s medical district, the historic Stockyards and DFW Airport (with direct access to the airport’s terminals and a cross-platform transfer to a future DART light rail line). The project is currently in the middle of its Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) process, with a Final EIS anticipated in 2009.

With a project of this length and scope comes major new station opportunities. The 37-mile system includes 13 new stations (along with service to two existing TRE stations downtown), each of which has various levels of development potential. The T could have chosen to focus entirely on its rail project without significant concern for station area planning (as many transit agencies around the country do). However, The T chose a different path in that it is proactively encouraging transit-oriented development planning around its proposed station sites and is using the DEIS consulting contract as a means to assist local governments in their initial TOD planning efforts. This process has been strongly encouraged by The T's staff involved in the project; Executive Director Dick Ruddell, Deputy Executive Director Nancy Amos and Planning Director (and SW2NE Project Manager) Curvie Hawkins.

The URS Transit & Urban Design Studio, working in partnership with the architecture firm Townscape Inc., of Dallas, is leading the TOD planning effort for the corridor. The process has four major components:

1. Constraints and opportunities analysis - The consulting team meets with local municipal staff members, elected officials, stakeholders, neighborhood interests and others to examine challenges and opportunities presented by the station area. This allows all participants to clearly see the realistic possibilities for development and to ensure that a realistic approach is taken on the front end of the process to help manage expectations and not over-promise the potential for TOD in the area. It also allows the project team to see major geographic, infrastructure, political or other issues that could affect development around the station over the long term.

2. Economic analysis - The consulting team conducts an objective economic market assessment of the station area to develop realistic forecasts of development potential for residential, commercial, retail, office and other types of development in the area for the future.

3. TOD Scenario Framework - The project team then develops a variety of development scenarios based on the economic analysis and opportunities/constraints analysis, focusing on both short-term and long-term options and examining low-, medium- and high-intensity scenarios for the local community to review and refine.

4. Final Report - The project team then consolidates all information into a final report that the local jurisdiction can use as a blueprint or starting point for additional analysis and development planning. The report also will recommend implementation strategies, regulatory requirements and other actions the local jurisdiction can take to help facilitate development.

While the project team meets with each jurisdiction in the corridor individually, a corridor-wide implementation workshop is planned at the end of the process. Using the expertise of staff members from Reconnecting America and its Center for Transit-Oriented Development, the project team will review financing and other implementation strategies that local jurisdictions can use to help keep their projects moving forward and provide added publicity to the corridor planning effort.

This corridor-wide approach to TOD planning can be a role model for other...
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communities because it has several advantages for both The T and local jurisdictions.

It has created tremendous goodwill between and among The T and local communities along the corridor. While the major focus has been on station areas in Fort Worth, Grapevine and DFW Airport (the entities currently providing funding for the project), the TOD planning effort has also extended to other communities along the corridor. These cities (Haltom City, North Richland Hills and Colleyville) do not yet have a funding mechanism in place for participation in the project. However, The T is including them in the planning process—and allowing them to use the TOD planning expertise of the consulting team—because it assumes that they will be partners in the project in the near future. This has greatly enhanced the relationship between The T and the communities all along the corridor.

Corridor communities are active participants in all facets of project planning in addition to their own TOD planning. Their participation in the TOD efforts have made them active partners and advocates for the entire project, further facilitating the ability of The T to keep the rail project moving forward. The TOD planning effort allows local communities and citizens to be more involved in — and have more ownership in — the entire project than they otherwise would have had.

Communities that might not have been able to initiate TOD planning efforts on their own can take advantage of the momentum generated by the services offered by The T. The T’s consultant assistance often provides the impetus for local communities to make TOD planning a high priority where it otherwise might not have existed. After completion of the initial TOD planning, the communities on the corridor can choose to follow up with more detailed projects (comprehensive plan amendments, zoning code changes, detailed development plans) later, if they choose to do so.

The corridor-wide approach allows a broader regional perspective, inhibits overt competition and results in a more
coordinated approach. Development is traditionally a zero-sum game, and the corridor-wide economic analysis conducted for the project allows the corridor to be examined as a whole and not just in a piecemeal basis. The use of the same team on the entire corridor also prevents communities from unduly competing with each other in trying to attract development. The corridor-wide approach allows a broader, more comprehensive approach to development throughout the system.

The corridor-wide effort provides the same expertise offered by the consulting firm to all communities, resulting in a balanced and consistent approach. The methodology used is the same for all communities, and the project deliverables (including the final report) looks roughly the same for all jurisdictions, so no one gets more analysis than anyone else.

The corridor-wide approach results in economies of scale. The use of one firm on the corridor’s planning efforts allows cost efficiencies in staff time, travel expenses and production.

The balanced approach that examines TOD throughout the entire corridor allows the management of expectations. The use of one team to conduct the entire corridor’s analysis allows the team to reinforce the true potential of each station area. Management of expectations is often the hardest aspect of this type of project. Every community wants its TOD to be Fruitvale or Mockingbird Station, but the role of the project team — especially when viewing all the plans from a corridor perspective — is to give local jurisdictions a realistic forecast of development potential.

The publicity related to the corridor-wide effort encourages other communities to begin thinking about similar efforts. The SW2NE Rail Corridor is one of 10 corridors planned for commuter rail service in the Dallas-Fort Worth area between now and 2030. Already, other communities along those future passenger rail corridors are starting to think about stations and TOD in their areas well in advance of the initiation of alternatives analyses or DEIS projects. That kind of momentum can eventually accelerate the rail planning in those corridors, as local and regional decision-makers start making funding priority decisions for future planning efforts.

This ground-breaking, corridor-wide TOD planning effort has led to a significant shift in the thinking of staff members of jurisdictions along the corridor. Instead of reacting to a project, they are active participants in all facets of the rail project’s planning. The result will be a trend toward long-term regional cooperation and, most importantly, the opportunity to focus development around stations to help facilitate future travel in an energy-challenged world.

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