



Transit and Development: Austin, Charlotte & Lessons Learned

Part 4 of 4

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Austin and Charlotte are leveraging their rail transit investments with substantial planning efforts. Austin has developed new TOD zoning, and Charlotte has gone even further with its integrated planning and implementation response.

AUSTIN

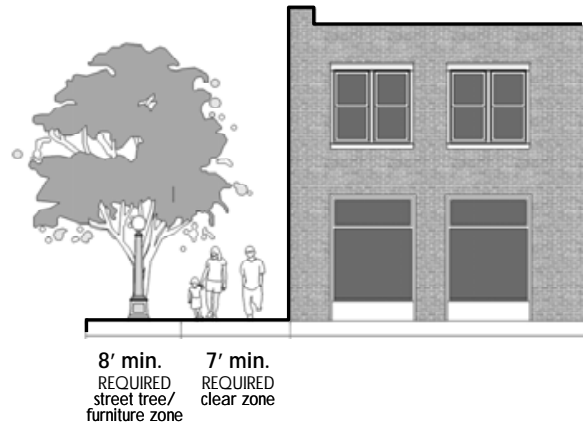
After losing a referendum for rail expansion in 2000 by 2,000 votes, Austin tried again in 2004 and received permission to build the first Capital MetroRail line. The Red Line, considered to be commuter rail with street running operations downtown, was scheduled to open in March 2009 but has been delayed until at least May. Austin is also in the planning process with MetroRapid, a bus rapid transit service, MetroRail expansion, and a transit circulator such as a streetcar. Although its first MetroRail line has yet to open, the third TOD station area plan has already been adopted. A recent market study projects the combined value of TOD at the first three station areas (with Station Area Plans) to range from \$900 million to \$1.6 billion.

Zoning for TOD

Austin is encouraging development around rail stations with the “TOD Ordinance.” When the City adopted the TOD Ordinance in 2005, it established six initial station areas as TOD Districts, classified as either “Neighborhood Center TOD,” “Town Center TOD,” “Regional Center TOD” or “Downtown TOD.”

This ordinance created a two-phase implementation process. The first phase establishes TOD boundaries and a zoning overlay. The overlay contains interim regulations for land use, parking and building setbacks. A planner for the City of Austin, Sonya Lopez, describes the rationale for the two-phase approach, “We wanted something in place immediately, but we knew we wouldn’t be able to adopt sweeping new standards without a public involvement process and looking at each area in more detail.”

The second phase is the creation of a Station Area Plan to establish specific zoning, urban design standards and development standards for a particular TOD district. The Station Area Plans determine permitted and conditional uses; prescribe site development regulations; and stipulate requirements for street and public area improvements. These plans are about 100 pages each and function as a distinct zoning code for each TOD district. “We used the city-wide design standards for TODs as a starting point,” Lopez



Austin's TOD Core Transit Corridor sidewalk requirements. Street trees are required along TOD Core Transit Corridors with an average spacing not greater than 30 feet on center, above.

Source: DRAFT REGULATING PLAN for the Lamar Blvd./Justin Lane TOD Station Area Plan (SAP), City of Austin

A similar street in St. Paul, below.



notes. “We didn’t want to create a whole new animal, but we deviated in some ways where the city’s design standards didn’t fit the TOD model.”

Design Standards

Austin enacted the city-wide Design Standards and Mixed-Use Ordinance described by Lopez in 2007. The ordinance is applicable to most non-residential and mixed-use development and redevelopment sites. It seeks to improve building and site design to be more pedestrian-friendly by creating requirements regarding the relationship between buildings and streets; street connectivity; parking reductions; exterior lighting; pedestrian amenities and mixed use development. The ordinance is applied by roadway type and includes a category for “Core Transit Corridors.” The Station Area Plans allow for zoning to be customized to each station area in the context of broader, citywide, standards.

As a result of the design standards and Station Area Plans, the desired TOD will be able to occur “by-right” – thus eliminating the need to obtain a special use permit or undergo a zoning change approval process before construction. By making the preferred development pattern the easiest to accomplish within the regulatory system, Austin hopes to streamline the development process for TOD.

CHARLOTTE

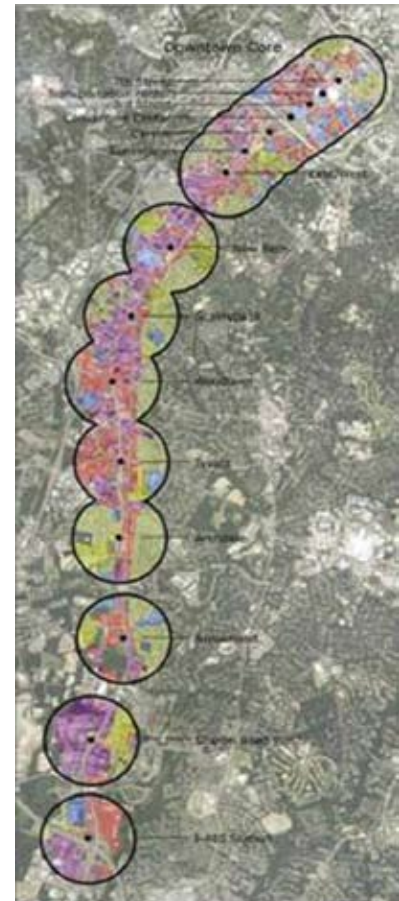
In Charlotte, the 10 mile LYNX Blue Line LRT surpassed first year ridership projections by 76 percent after opening in November 2007. Currently, 7,000 new housing units are planned or in construction around the line’s 15 stations and private development investment along the LYNX Blue Line has exceeded \$1.86 billion. Plans are underway for an extension of the Blue Line, a commuter rail line, a streetcar system and two east-west transit corridors where the mode has not been determined yet.

Integrated Planning and Free Rezoning

The land use and transportation planning occurred simultaneously for the South Corridor (where the Blue Line is located). Tracy Finch is a former Charlotte economic development planner who became a TOD developer and planning commissioner. She is enthusiastic about Charlotte’s planning process. “Everyone was always at the table,” she notes. “Those of us in City departments such as planning, transportation and engineering sat with the people from CATS, the regional transit authority, for joined transit and land use planning.”

The City of Charlotte has been an active supporter of TOD, defining one-half mile walking areas around the South Corridor stations as the focus for new land use and infrastructure planning and rezoning. The Planning Commission has proactively sponsored site-specific rezonings for TOD where new regulations – the result of the station area planning process – were not yet in place. The rezonings to TOD districts could be requested by any property owners and developers and the City waved the \$3,000-4,000 fees for upzoning their property. “The City didn’t realize how good the rezoning was,” remarks Finch. “It was a great goodwill gesture that the development community really appreciated.”

The station area planning process has taken longer to complete. To date, eight stations have adopted stations area plans, and a ninth is in draft phase. The station area plans have identified areas of stability and further areas for rezoning to transit supportive districts, such as TOD-M, TOD-E, TOD-R (short



Station Area Planning along Charlotte's South Corridor

Source: Reconnecting America, TOD Toolkit: Making a Profit, Creating a Community PowerPoint Presentation, undated.

for TOD Mixed Use, Employment and Residential, respectively) and several mixed-use districts. In some of the future transit corridors, station areas that are waiting to go through a station area planning process received new zoning overlays to help transition to more appropriate land uses during the interim period.

Infrastructure and Implementation

Along the South Corridor, a \$50 million bond for infrastructure was issued, although that only covered a fraction of the \$200 million for sidewalks and intersection improvements identified. The City has often waited for the private sector to initiate development then worked together on a public-private agreement to get streets built. Aside from public-private efforts, the City also concentrated on key economic generators – such as turning a prominent unsightly intersection to an attractive, pedestrian friendly one. The Urban Street Design Guidelines, adopted in 2007, are often used in station area plans because they create better streets for all users – pedestrians, bicyclists and automobiles – and support land uses adjacent to transit.

The City created a TOD Response Team to help developers with getting entitlements, required public improvements and financial assistance for TOD along transit corridors. Considering the TOD zoning system was new, there were many questions that had to be answered. Finch says the role of the TOD Response Team “helped developers understand what you can and can’t do and helped work through many problems.” Additionally, the TOD response team helped negotiate encroachment agreements for stoops or retail along the transit corridor or reimbursements for infrastructure as well as development agreements for jointly funded infrastructure.

Charlotte has found success with seeking opportunities to leverage public and private dollars. The developers that want TOD zoning see the benefit of great streetscapes and connectivity as amenities to their projects. Finch says she would still like to better streamline the agreement process, but otherwise has found the Charlotte TOD process to work well.

LESSONS LEARNED

The TOD that has occurred around the country has not happened by chance – it is the product of focused effort by public and private partners. The rapid expansion of transit around the country is accompanied by a variety of accompanying TOD planning efforts. What are these planning lessons?

1. Corridor workshops can be a great way to understand the market for potential development in the corridor. Corridor and Station Area Typologies can help organize the planning effort.
2. Station Area Plans benefit from the integration of land use and transit planning to ensure the results of each process work together.
3. Rezoning to transit-friendly districts should follow the planning process. New mixed-use zoning districts and street design standards usually need to be written.
4. The implementation process goes more smoothly when there is a dedicated team of City staff who can solve problems.
5. Leveraging funding from the public and private sector using joint development, development agreements or public private partnerships may be useful options to implement infrastructure.



New construction is occurring next the Uptown Station in downtown Charlotte.
Source: www.flickr.com

Why complete all this planning work? As the adage goes, “You get out of it what you put into it.” The County of Arlington, Virginia centered its growth near the Metro stations in the 1970s. By 2006 8 percent of county land near the Rosslyn-Ballston Metro corridor generated 33 percent of county revenues. In Arlington, 50 percent of residents take transit to work, development has generated only modest increases in traffic, and 73 percent of people walk to stations. The ability to connect people and jobs via transit in the Washington DC region would not have been possible without the planning and sustained focus on implementation over the last 30 years.



The Nicollet Mall station in downtown Minneapolis.

Next Steps in the Twin Cities

With the creation of the Counties Transit Improvement Board (CTIB) in 2008 and its new dedicated funding, transit expansion is anticipated to accelerate. In 2008, CTIB has already approved \$86 million in its first round of grants for short-term projects, including matching funds for Central Corridor, the Northstar Line’s Fridley station, an Apple Valley Park & Ride and an express bus from Forest Lake to downtown Minneapolis. Long-term planning for future transit by CTIB will begin in 2009. However, a regional vision for TOD and growth in the Twin Cities has yet to emerge.

The Center for Transit Oriented Development, a program of Reconnecting America and Strategic Economics, has created the Twin Cities TOD Toolkit that offers general guidance for TOD in the region. Yet defining and implementing a list of next steps that moves from rhetoric to reality is a substantial undertaking.

Different regions in the U.S. have designed their TOD implementation to work with their government structure. For example, the Portland has a strong regional government, Metro, which has taken a more active role while the City and County of Denver has been a leader in its region.

So far, the TOD planning process in the Twin Cities has generally been lead by municipalities with some support from the counties. Bloomington Central Station is one of a few that has benefits from the presence of a private master developer, McGough Companies. In other areas where property ownership is more fragmented, city government can become more influential.

If transit lines in the Twin Cities, including the Bottineau Corridor Line, want to be competitive in the federal funding process, then effective TOD plans will need strong support from public and private stakeholders. Future transit users in the Bottineau Corridor should be able to use the transit line with comfort and ease from the front door of their home to the front door of their destination. For this is to happen, planning for TOD will need concentrated effort to ensure that it is successful.