



# Transit and Development: Successes, Challenges & Innovation in Portland

Part 3 of 4

March 2009

## PORTLAND

Portland, a city of light rail, streetcars and buses, is renowned as a great place for urban living. Portland opened its first light rail line in 1986 and first streetcar line in 2001. Currently, the region is adding a new commuter rail line, a new light rail line and a streetcar loop around downtown.

### Early Light Rail & TOD Challenges

An early region to build light rail and attempt transit oriented development, Portland offers numerous lessons. Steve Coyle, an architect who has worked on streetcar corridor and light rail TOD plans in the Portland region, notes, “One of the biggest TOD-making challenges was the light rail alignment that ran where the transit agency had access, using existing right of way or where land was easier to get.” This resulted in light rail running along Interstate 84, State Road 26 and along freight rail lines in suburban areas. Some stations were located adjacent to the freeway – and not near population centers – so it was more difficult to attract quality transit oriented development and placemaking around these stations.



The Pearl District in Portland is served by streetcars.  
Source: [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)

The early zoning standards for station areas were also a significant constraint, as Coyle recalls. The zoning standards were primarily two dimensional – requiring high target densities, often around 50 units per acre, with conventional parking standards adjacent to the station, thus missing the opportunity to create short but active pedestrian corridors. These “form-less” development standards did little to encourage spatially-defined, three-dimensional, human-scale places, that would, for example, restrict the placement of parking structures or large parking lots next to the station or require windows on the ground floor of buildings to create more active street fronts. The targeted density was also difficult politically when suburban sites were located near single-family neighborhoods. Coyle comments, “This kind of ‘hammer-seeking-nails’ approach to LRT alignment and building TOD ignores key strategies such as graduating densities from the TOD’s edge to the center, carefully designing infrastructure for both pedestrian and vehicle access, or creating a market environment and physical context that attracts retailers.”



Goose Hollow Stadium Station Apartments were built in 1998 as all affordable units.  
Source: [Portland Bureau of Planning](http://Portland Bureau of Planning)

The past remedy was often design guidelines which are technically suggestions that do not change the legal development standards. This resulted in development that was more likely to gain approval than to offer innovative design. To alleviate this problem, Coyle recommends a form-based code with urban and architectural design standards.

Understanding the market realities of transit oriented development was another challenge: sometimes there was a naïve perspective that developers could bear all of the risk of an untested product. In the public private partnerships created, the transit agency built structured parking and then expected developers to do the rest. As Coyle describes, “When the centerpiece of a TOD is a parking structure – a car magnet that creates a lot of traffic, it is difficult for developers to build a TOD around a parking structure.” Coyle adds that a better location for a parking structure is within a five to ten minute walking distance of a station to generate pedestrian traffic and balance the TOD’s walkability and drivability.

### TOD Results in the Suburbs

One of the most successful suburban stations in the Portland region is Orenco Station, a transit-oriented development with 1,800 homes, a town center, office, grocery, retail and nearby employment on 209 acres. It is located in the town of Hillsboro just west of Portland and features a grid of walkable, tree-lined streets and parks. Cottages, condominiums and rowhomes surround a town center. The light rail station is located on the southern side of the project, about a five minute walk from the heart of the town center. Orenco was a greenfield site, which made it easier to develop a wholly new mixed-use zoning code for the area.



The Orenco Station town center, above, and townhomes, below.  
Source: [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)



Michael Mehaffy, a TOD consultant based in Portland and the former owner’s representative for Orenco Station, describes the importance of close collaboration between public and private entities, “The developer helped to write the zoning and asked for flexibility in following the market, in exchange for a commitment to deliver a functional town center and complete mixed-use community. The ongoing collaboration meant that the project could be more ambitious than it would have been with a more prescriptive regulatory approach.”

He notes the town center benefited significantly from a location on an arterial street that had 20,000-30,000 passing cars. It provided the project higher visibility and access than it could have achieved with the light rail station, which even now has less than 3,000 trips per day. Mehaffy felt it would have been better to run the light rail line closer to the arterial, but the design of the project was optimal given the decisions for the transit and roadway alignments.

Beaverton Round was one of the stations that experienced problems with development. Begun in the late 1990s, the project went through bankruptcy partway through construction. The Round was in previously developed suburban location, surrounded primarily by car dealerships. Both Coyle and Mehaffy, cite the location, a place with poor vehicular access far from any busy arterial streets, as a major problem for the development: retail needs either intense pedestrian activity or adequate vehicle activity or both to survive, and the Round had neither. Mehaffy considers the alignment at the Round to be far from ideal, “About four blocks away is the historic downtown area, which has great urban bones but is crying out for revitalization; instead they bypassed it and built a project that even now is having a hard time getting to critical mass. There were reasons at the time that all this seemed necessary - cost, politics, etc - but still,

these are lessons learned.” Although the street pattern of the original downtown remains, car dealerships and mini-malls have erased much of historic Beaverton.

Near the Round, the light rail ran at high speeds, yet the station was in the middle of a pedestrian only plaza with condos located less than 50 feet from the tracks. Mehaffy notes, “There were a lot of problems trying to get retail to work there [at the Round] and the placement of the high-speed light rail in the middle of the piazza wasn’t the best design.” In retrospect, the design seems better suited for streetcar transit, which is less disruptive to pedestrian space than light rail.

### Streetcar Successes

The City of Portland has experienced its greatest success with private development along its streetcar corridors, more quickly and robustly than from development near or around light rail stations. The City of Portland considers its streetcar system to be Development Oriented Transit – a catalyst to bring high density, mixed-use development into the city. Since 1997, \$3.5 billion has been invested within two blocks of the streetcar and 55 percent of all central business district development has occurred within one block of the streetcar. Stuart Gwin, a transportation planner at the Portland Office of Transportation, describes the situation in Portland, “There is a strong momentum with the streetcar and it has been very successful at attracting development.”

Around the downtown areas, development agreements are often used to condition the public investment in transit with private investment in development. Development agreements, for example, are used to tie minimum development density to public improvements, allowing higher density development (with reduced parking) to be built which would not be possible without the Portland streetcar in place.

Coyle credits the success of the streetcar system in Portland with its smaller scale that fits well in a higher intensity, walkable urban context, “Streetcars are the ideal mechanism for creating TOD nodes and TOD corridors.” he explains. “They offer slower but reliable point-to-point and block-to-block transit service.” The streetcar system, located in the center of Portland, benefits from a walkable urban fabric, whereas some of the LRT stations do not inherit the advantage of urban infrastructure and buildings.



The Portland Streetcar travels in mixed traffic.  
Source: TriMet Community Building Sourcebook



Beaverton Round, above and below.  
Source: www.flickr.com



### Programmatic and Planning Innovations

As a way to spur TOD near LRT lines, Portland’s regional government, Metro, targets TOD development gap financing with the Transit-Oriented Development and Centers Program. The TOD/Centers Program provides public investments to developers to build more intensely and a higher quality walkable environment than the market would otherwise provide. This program utilizes site control, financial participation, and other joint development tools, operating through cooperative agreements between Metro and local governments or private developers. The primary source of

funding is federal funds distributed through the Metropolitan Transportation Improvement Program; other funding sources have included CMAQ funds, direct FTA funds, earmarks, and local government funds.

While the TOD/Centers Program allowed development to occur that may not have otherwise happened, the value of this program is debated in Portland. The program has contributed to Beaverton Round; some see this as an ineffective use of funds because the Round has been beset with so many problems. Yet this program has also contributed to several development projects in Gresham, which is perceived as a successful area in terms of TOD. These projects include Central Point, which won the Governor's Livability award for design excellence, and The Crossings, which features apartments that were 100 percent leased with a waiting list after completion.

The list of programs that support TOD around LRT and streetcar lines in the Portland region is long. These programs include the Bike Central program; the Pedestrian Program by the City of Portland's Office of Transportation and corresponding Pedestrian Master Plan; the Fareless Square fare-free transit service in the central business district; TOD tax and fee exemptions in Gresham; and the TOD tax exemptions in Portland.

Portland is still trying to improve its TOD planning efforts near LRT lines. The recent *Portland LRT 10 Station Area Best Practices Assessments and Recommendations* report highlights some of the areas that Portland is seeking to strengthen. (See sidebar) For example, these ideas include sticking to a coherent vision and creating places with careful design that knits buildings and streets together instead of projects that focus on a single building. As Gwin describes, "The recommendations are based on the Portland's experiences with TOD and reflect what the region has learned over time." Gwin notes that the 20 minute neighborhood – having daily needs and shopping available within 20 minutes by walking, bicycling, transit or driving – is



The Portland LRT.  
Source: [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)

another new concept taking hold in Portland's planning efforts. Despite the challenges Portland has faced, the TOD planning has shown significant improvement over time and Portland continues to be a leader in TOD innovation.

## Portland Station Area Best Practices Checklist

### Form a coherent vision

- Articulate a plan; look to the future but build on current conditions
- Involve stakeholders
- Focus on implementation
- Maintain flexibility
- Understand market demographics
- Engage corporate attention

### Get the land uses right

- Make retail strategy market driven, not transit driven
- Develop mixed-income housing and encourage every price point to live around transit
- Segregate uses where appropriate—mixed uses don't have to be in the same place

### Promote density

- Maximize transit ridership and access—peak and off-peak demands
- Build retail market base
- Locate employment areas near the station to promote reverse commuting

### Create convenient, comfortable pedestrian & bicycle connections

- Connect the grid; provide well-designed sidewalks
- Develop compact blocks to disperse traffic; use block faces for on-street parking to support retail
- Create seamless access to neighborhoods, develop more small streets and create quiet, intimate thoroughfares
- Maximize safety and comfort through lighting, design of buildings, plazas and streets
- Build bike parking
- Calm traffic and eliminate minimum traffic LOS standards

### Build a place not a project; ensure good urban design

- Design with the station as the center
- Use high quality urban form to support mixed incomes and uses
- Make places that engage the public
- Create landmarks and beacons
- Preserve and invest in existing neighborhoods
- Taper density and height from stations to neighborhoods

### Get the parking right

- Locate Park & Ride within a 5 minute walk of the platform but not directly in front of the station; locate utility structures so as not to preclude redevelopment of prime station-proximate sites
- Develop shared parking policies
- Design structured parking well—wrap structures with commercial and residential uses and with active ground floor uses

### Make bus transit and TDM work

- Provide feeder transit and make buses attractive
- Provide local and workplace shuttles
- Embrace TOD and TDM to maximize trip reduction

### Create supportive public policies

- Pursue joint development
- Focus public investments to support market / real estate dynamics