



nerej

Public transportation provides opportunity for cities eager to attract new industries - by Thomas House

April 06, 2018 - Northern New England

Thomas House,
THA Architects, LLC

Transit-oriented development - or TOD - is no longer a set of random dots on a map. The dots are most often connected by rail and these connections are a vector - a trend.

The definition, as you might have surmised, is highlighted by optimized mixed-use components (residential, business, and leisure space) within walking distance of public transportation.

Here in New England, “public transportation” ideally means “trains,” ergo high-density housing and commercial development with a train or light rail station at its center or immediately adjacent. Historically, this is how neighborhoods in cities grew – starting from the transit stop and radiating outward. In TOD, this situation is often engineered in reverse – and for reasons less utopian than “getting people out of their cars for the sake of the environment” and the like.

There are tangible benefits to the communities and neighborhoods who successfully create and develop such a large-scale program. Underway right now is the Rantoul St. renewal in Beverly, on Boston’s North Shore. High density housing combines with mixed-use commercial (retail and office) within walking distance of Beverly Depot commuter rail station. Once a pothole-scarred eyesore, this neighborhood is now a honeypot for young professionals looking for access to in-town jobs, local beaches, and the mountains that beckon in N.H. and Maine.

Let’s travel further afield on the Amtrak Downeaster. There we reach Maine Street Station in Brunswick, a multi-modal transportation hub now at the center of commercial offices, service centers, healthcare, retail, restaurants, theater and residential space. If you lived there, you’d be home, a safe walking distance, with rideshare, rentals, busses, and taxi-service there for last-mile transportation.

To build on this success, the Maine state legislature has authorized a development plan to extend the concept to Lewiston-Auburn, using rail on existing rights of way, from the Portland Transportation Center, where the adjacent 30 acres have already seen new growth in restaurants, retail, and entertainment venues; plans for a motel, multi-unit residential, and museum are on the

boards.

One can think of rail as an arterial supply of opportunity to cities eager to attract new industries – providing desirable high-density housing for the tech-savvy talent to operate these businesses. Which is to say nothing of the bistros that feed them, and the consultants who do their taxes.

This isn't a plan to get people out of their cars because climate change, whatever. As Anthony Donovan of the KW Commercial Team, who is involved in both the Maine St. Station and the Lewiston-Auburn rail initiative says, "it's a great way, perhaps the best way, to get people to live in, love, and grow your community."

In New England, the Green Line Extension has been greenlighted (with the usual delays owing to Massachusetts politics) which will extend the oldest subway line in the U.S. by 4.3 miles, with one branch reaching Union Square in Somerville, and the other to College Ave. in Medford (think: Tufts University).

This monster project weighs in at \$1 billion, give or take, and considering the difficulty prying money from legislative bodies, you can gauge the confidence that a very significant return on this investment is expected - one can easily imagine these locations resembling the hopping Davis Square on Somerville's Red Line station.

What are those benefits likely to be? Beyond vastly improved curb appeal (and smooth pavement), the number one benefit for the cities that successfully get TOD going will be an influx of new residents patronizing local businesses...and adding to the tax base.

These residents bring new energy, new ideas, a larger pool of community resources, entrepreneurs, and volunteers. Moreover, many states have instituted affordable housing obligations that cities and towns must meet, such as Massachusetts' Chapter 40B, and it is common to use some of the new housing stock to meet these requirements - the costs of which are offset by subsidies, and the increased tax base.

Without resorting to justifiable (but difficult to prove) assertions of cost savings, which is an abstraction that legislative bodies can't calculate, the positives – increased revenues and economic activity – more than offset the difference.

So let people have their cars. If they can walk to the train and avoid the crawl down U.S.-1 into town, they will gladly leave the car in the garage because it just makes more sense.

Thomas House, AIA, is principal of THA Architects, LLC, Stratham, N.H.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540