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On Track with TODs

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By Teresa O'Dea Hein, Managing Editor

With gas prices topping \$4 a gallon this past summer, it may come as no surprise that ridership on a number of city rail lines is up considerably this year. Likewise, interest in transit-oriented development (TOD) has been picking up speed.

A commonly accepted definition of what qualifies as a TOD is a development within a 10-minute walk or a quarter of a mile of a train station or other transportation stop. Bob Koch, AIA, of Fugleberg Koch Architects, explains that housing that is a quarter of a mile from public transportation can command a premium. "Lifestyle and time concerns are two of the most important factors to consider when marketing TODs," says Koch, whose firm organized a bus tour at Multi-Housing World, held in September in Denver, to see firsthand how the Mile-High City has embraced the concept of TOD in developments like East West Partners' master-planned Riverfront Park residential community near Union Station. Koch notes that apartments located one-quarter mile from a transit hub can generate rents that are 50 cents per square foot higher than communities another quarter mile farther from public transit.

Denver now operates 35 miles of light rail on six different lines, and has ambitious plans to build much more, if it can find a way around spiraling construction costs and declining sales tax revenues. Ridership in the first quarter of 2008 was up 13 percent, reports Bill Sirois, manager of transit-oriented development for the Regional Transportation District/FasTracks. The Center for Transit Oriented Development predicts 155,000 housing units will be built within a half mile of metro Denver transit stations by 2030, Sirois notes.

Furthermore, James D. Qualk, LEED AP and director of LEED Facilitation Sale from SSRGX Sustainable Solutions Group points out that transit-oriented developments can also utilize rubber-tired vehicles like buses.

With its reliance on walkable conveniences and public transit, TOD can be good for the environment as well as the bottom line. Proximity to public transportation, typically on already developed sites that are sometimes in need of revitalization, is inherently green, industry observers point out. In recognition of that, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) credits can be earned.

Furthermore, TODs often mean that costly parking ratios can be reduced as well, thereby cutting development expenses. And, some municipalities may help fund a wide variety of needed infrastructure such as sidewalks, garages and utilities.

However, the development process can take longer with TODs, warns Art Lomenick, managing director with Trammell Crow Co. and president of its subsidiary, High Street Residential.

"It takes a different breed of developer to undertake a TOD," agrees Ernesto (Ernie) Vasquez, AIA, founding principal of MVE Architects, based in Irvine, Calif. "This requires a strong understanding of the public/private development process, with multiple presentations required to a variety of stakeholders, and the time required to get commitments and approvals is often a five-year process from site selection to completion. At the same time," Vasquez adds, "these are the kinds of projects communities want so some of the approvals can be streamlined and public financing can be available for some of the infrastructure costs."

MVE is even working on a TOD in Russia, about 35 minutes by a new rail link from Moscow.

The more diversified a transit village is in terms of uses such as housing, retail, office, educational, and/or other services, the more it takes some of the risk out of that development, Vasquez points out, and helps fill the "18-hour day." He admits that awareness of more around-the-clock uses is stronger today in TOD design. Plus, TODs need "generators" to have people other than residents come to the development as well, Vasquez adds. For example, he and Lomenick note that some TODs even include a civic venue, such as a library, city hall or performing arts theater, or a childcare facility, health service or a culinary school.

Another experienced TOD advocate is Thomas Cox, AIA, founder and managing principal of TCA, an architecture, planning and urban design firm with offices in downtown Los Angeles and Orange County. "City planners in a number of places like Los Angeles, San Francisco and Denver are pretty far ahead of the curve on TOD," Cox reports. And several of his firm's TOD projects are aiming for LEED ratings.

To make TOD communities appealing, Cox says it's important to consider issues like acoustic control and window

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locations, given the nearby train tracks, and traffic patterns so people can cross streets safely at busy intersections. Including greenspace—while not building in "lurker spots"—and secure walking routes are also key priorities. "It's also essential to articulate the faces of the buildings and break up the wall mass, sometimes with a differentiation of materials," he adds, "as well as create active streetscapes, with features like stoops or appealing pedestrian plazas with a number of uses."

In the Philadelphia Main Line suburb of Ardmore, Penn., developer Dranoff Properties is actually rebuilding a train station as part of its four-phase TOD that will ultimately include 330 multifamily housing units plus retail, offices and parking. "Public/private partnerships can be catalysts for projects that public agencies can't undertake on their own," points out CEO and Founder Carl Dranoff. His Ardmore Station project, designed by Philadelphia's JKR Partners LLC, recently garnered a \$6 million grant for the township from the state of Pennsylvania.

Ardmore Station's first phase incorporates renovating the train station, building a mid-rise residential structure of about 100 units, parking and street-level retail and offices.

Tracking gains

"TOD encompasses a lot of moving parts, with a lot of partnerships required to work with," says Sirois. "But TOD will be a major factor in shaping growth in the Denver region," he adds.

Development of transit options continues to accelerate. For example, early in 2009, Austin, Texas is opening its first light rail line with a 32-mile service between downtown Austin and Leander, while Valley Metro of Phoenix, Ariz. will also open its first light-rail segment, spanning 20.3 miles from Monebello to Mesa via Sky Harbor International Airport and downtown Phoenix.

However, because TOD is only as good as the transportation system is, people will get frustrated if the service isn't what they'd expected, Lomenick says. High Street Residential has four TOD projects underway, including the first ever to be built in Austin. It has 1,100 TOD housing units in the pipeline to start construction over the next 12 months and another 1,200 units under proposal. Its TOD projects are located in a number of locations, from Garland, Texas to Atlanta.

The next year will be telling for TOD development, Lomenick predicts, depending on whether the federal government allocates adequate funding for public transportation initiatives.

His advice to other developers? "Really look at the macro level before committing resources for planning and development—think of how the area around the transit station will evolve."

Furthermore, Lomenick warns, "If you have to get in your car to reach services, that's not good TOD."

An example of a well-planned TOD is the 2008 winner in the TOD category of MHN's 2008 Design Excellence Awards program—Pacifica, a mixed-use development in downtown Long Beach, Calif. that contains 62 condos and 5,300 sq. ft. of ground-floor retail. Designed by Torrance, Calif.-based Withee Malcolm Architects, Pacifica is located within the Promenade district of downtown Long Beach and is a half block from the Blue Line light rail, connecting Long Beach to downtown Los Angeles. A public-private venture with the city of Long Beach Redevelopment Agency, Pacifica is part of a pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use redevelopment area. It offers one-, two- and three-bedroom plans configured as single-floor lofts and two-story townhouses that range in size from 664 to 2,139 sq. ft. This urban infill site consists of a 0.66-acre lot.

As a first step in the reinvention of the Promenade as a major residential, commercial and entertainment destination, the Redevelopment Agency collaborated with four residential developers, including Lennar, and Embassy Suites to develop a mix of for-sale condominiums, rental apartments and a hotel along the Promenade. Improvements to the city's walkway will include landscaping, street furniture, lighting, gateways and public art plazas.

In a region dominated by developments with stucco finishes, Pacifica's contemporary architecture reflects its port city locale with an industrial/maritime sensibility that borrows both its blue/grey palette and unexpected mix of materials from the ships and cargo containers in the nearby harbor.

All things considered, Cox predicts, "In the future, people will say, 'How did we not do more of sustainable design like TOD sooner?'"

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