



Transitway Impacts Research Program (TIRP) Research Brief

Strategies for Achieving Transit-Oriented Development

Key Findings

- No single strategy—or even set of strategies—will make transit-oriented development (TOD) easy or quick to achieve.
- Regions with success in system-wide TOD have been at it for decades and have consistently funded it, whether through grants, public infrastructure, or other means.
- Interagency and interjurisdictional coordination is critical.

Project Background and Design

In current policy and fiscal environments, the governments and public agencies that most strongly desire TOD have little ability to implement it through their own actions. Conversely, the private-sector and nonprofit entities whose actions are needed for TOD may not share a city's or regional planning body's goals for transit-oriented growth patterns and built forms.

Previous research has focused primarily on the impacts and benefits of TOD, not on how to accomplish it in the real world. In this project, a U of M research team explored how the public sector can overcome challenges and encourage TOD at a regional scale.

Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with officials from transit agencies and organizations around the nation. They also created typologies of TOD programs, performed several analyses, and developed a set of case studies to add further context.

Regions studied include the San Francisco Bay Area (with one of the longest, best-researched records of TOD in the nation); the Washington, D.C., metro area (focusing specifically on a uniquely robust transit joint development program); Portland, Oregon (offering a parallel to the Twin Cities' regional governance structure); and Denver, Colorado (offering a comparison to a region similar in size and density to the Twin Cities but further along in building out its regional transit system).

Project Results

Changing preferences represent an opportunity

Changing preferences for development types and lifestyles are both a key driver of TOD and an opportunity to make real progress in promoting it. In particular, the rising prominence of the millennial generation in real estate markets represents a fundamental shift in possibilities.

Goals needed for TOD

TOD programs vary significantly in the forms they take, the actions they undertake, and even in their underlying reasons. Findings suggest it is important for organizations to carefully consider their own goals and capacities, as well as the specific circumstances in which they hope to foster TOD.

Transit system focus

TOD is seen as a community-building task centered on transit stations, rather than a series of individual projects. In addition, transit service type and quality are critical to TOD prospects and success. Fixed guideway transit in general—and rail transit in particular—provides the strongest opportunity for TOD.

The impact of zoning and regulations

There's a strong perception that conventional zoning and development regulations hinder TOD. Regions that reformed zoning saw real successes in TOD.

TIRP Partners and Supporters:

Anoka County

Center for Transportation Studies, University of Minnesota

Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota

City of Bloomington

City of Minneapolis

City of Saint Paul

Dakota County

Federal Transit Administration

Hennepin County

Hennepin–University Partnership

Metropolitan Council

Metro Transit

Minnesota Department of Transportation

Ramsey County

State and Local Policy Program, Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota

University Metropolitan Consortium, University of Minnesota

Washington County



The case for coordination

Case studies point to the importance of well-established mechanisms for regional coordination. Building a strong constituency for TOD is also important.

A role for affordable housing

Affordable housing can be a natural ally of TOD—it provides a guaranteed base of station-area population growth and high rates of transit use.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The overarching conclusion of this research is that there is no single strategy, or even a simple set of strategies, that will make system-level TOD easy or quick to achieve.

One specific finding is the importance of persistence: Regions with high degrees of success in system-wide TOD have been at it for decades. They have also consistently funded TOD efforts, whether in terms of planning grants, supportive public infrastructure, or direct loan and grant financing.

Another conclusion is that TOD at a regional scale is a complex process, almost invariably involving coordination between multiple agencies and levels of government, as well as the nonprofit and private sectors.

The researchers propose three key recommendations:

- Focus on public investments that attract private dollars.
- Maximize the effectiveness of public resources by timing investments around new transit expansions.
- Build durable structures for interagency and interjurisdictional coordination.

“The recommendations are useful guidance to help the public sector be the most effective in achieving TOD goals.”

— Lucy Galbraith, TOD Director, Metro Transit

About the Research

Specific Strategies for Achieving Transit-Oriented Development was authored by Andrew Guthrie (research fellow) and Yingling Fan (associate professor) at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs. The research was sponsored by the Transitway Impacts Research Program.