



Transit and Development: On the Fast Track in Denver

Part 2 of 4

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DENVER

With the passage of FasTracks in 2004, Denver is en route to the largest expansion of transit in the country. FasTracks is a 12 year comprehensive plan for building 119 miles of new light rail and commuter rail lines, 18 miles of bus rapid transit service, 57 new transit stations and 21,213 new park-n-ride spaces. The FasTracks legislation funded the \$4.9 billion plan through a combination of 50 percent regional sales tax, 25 percent federal funds and 25 percent from other local sources. Six new transit corridors and extensions to three existing corridors are planned for completion by 2017. Between 2004 and 2008, the FasTracks price tag has risen to \$7.9 billion due in part to rising construction costs; final funding of the entire project is still under discussion.



Downtown Denver's pedestrian mall is lively and active.

The Denver region has launched a major planning initiative to facilitate transit oriented development near current and future station locations. This initiative is conducted by the City and County of Denver planning department in conjunction with the public works and economic development departments along with RTD (Regional Transportation District, Denver's transit agency). The goal of the planning process is to identify a vision and strategy for change at station areas.

Corridor Workshops

Corridor workshops in Denver are credited for accomplishing difficult planning work. RTD organized corridor-wide TOD workshops among jurisdictions to coordinate planning efforts and refine transit project design to maximize TOD potential. The corridor workshops use federal grant funding made available by Denver's Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), the Denver Regional Council of Governments. RTD's Strategic Plan for Transit Oriented Development identified their ideal timeline for TOD planning to coincide with transit planning. (See figure 1, below)

Figure 1: RTD's Station Area Planning Process

| | Phase I | Phase II | Phase III |
|-----------------------------|--|--|---|
| Project Development Process | Draft EIS/EA (Including Alternatives Analysis & Basic Engineering) | Preliminary Engineering/ Final EIS | Final Design / Construction |
| TOD Process | TOD Assessment Start Station Area Planning | Corridor TOD Workshops Adopt Station Area Plans | Implementation (adopt new zoning / public-private partnerships / design & construction) |

The corridor workshops occurred separate from the environmental documentation process (the Environment Impact Statement or 'EIS'), but the workshop informs that process so it considers TOD concerns that may not otherwise be addressed in the standard EIS scope. Gideon Berger, a planner for the City and County of Denver articulates some of the challenges working with the EIS process, "The EIS is not a great way to think about TOD," he explains, "The EIS keeps the scope narrow – only looking at the right of way, which is not a good way to deal with TOD."



Stapleton, a large mixed-use project in Denver, offers high quality multi-family housing surrounding the town green, above, and single family homes, below.

Berger notes that the corridor workshops went beyond the EIS requirements, addressing a wide range of land use issues. The workshops directed questions about land use to the EIS process that would not have otherwise been asked. The biggest land use issue was often the question of access – how pedestrians or bicyclists would connect to a station (who may come from home or have left a car elsewhere). As a result workshop process and the questions about access, the transit planning and EIS considered a larger picture and improved the TOD potential around new stations.



The corridor workshops tackled challenges such as the location of retail – which was particularly difficult because local governments depend on sales taxes for revenue and attracting retail often becomes a jurisdictional competition. Strategic Economics, a consulting and research firm, used corridor typology to consider corridors as a submarket: as employment gets added at one station then demand for housing increases at others.

The workshops have been helpful, although they have not resulted in as much collaboration between the planning efforts of cities along each corridor as initially hoped. While the corridor workshops included recommendations for all stations, two corridors have benefited from business groups that represent the corridor. These business groups have taken a significant leadership role, taking ownership over the implementation process.

Corridor to Station: Using Typology

The City of Denver identified Station Area Typology for all stations in its strategic plan. The idea of Station Area Typology originated from Reconnecting America who aided Denver with their process. The typology options include "Downtown," "Major Urban Center," "Urban Center," "Urban Neighborhood," "Commuter Town Center," "Main Street" and "Campus / Special Events" stations. For each typology option, the desired land use mix, housing types, commercial and employment types, proposed scale and transit system function are described in detail.

"The typologies have been really useful, considering we are planning 24 stations and have 12 more to plan," Berger observes. "The typology created six to seven buckets to group station 'types' that address how they function and the infrastructure needed."

Station Area Plans

Before the Denver Regional Council of Governments established a funding pool for planning efforts, very little station area planning occurred. The initial \$2 million pool provided matching funds to local government and jumpstarted station area plans. The pool combines federal congestion, mitigation and air-quality funds. By the end of 2007, \$1.7 million was awarded for planning at 21 stations and a new round of funding for 2008 was ready for applications. Since the Station Area Plans did not begin until the funding pool was established, some plans were created for older stations that opened between 1994 and 2006 while other plans for new stations followed the RTD timeline for station area planning alongside transit planning.

To date, rezoning frequently has followed station area planning: Lakewood adopted a new transit-mixed use zone, rezoning four station areas; Littleton amended a PUD in a station area to include housing near previously planned commercial; and Denver rezoned two station area sites to allow for mixed-use development.

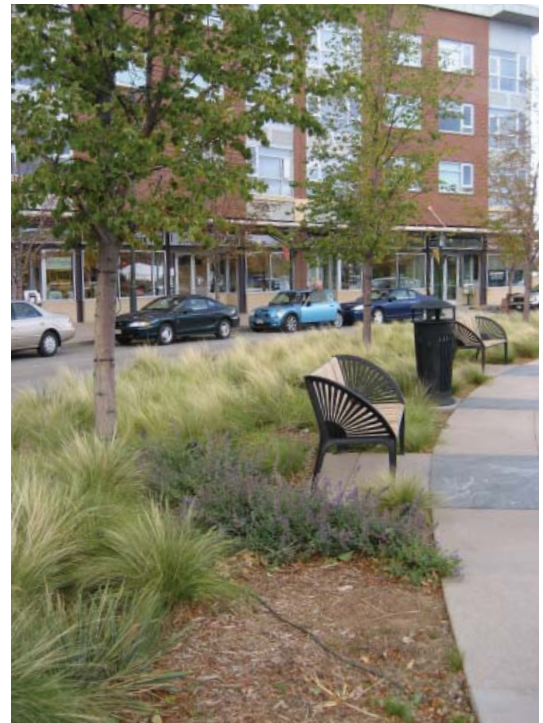
Creating a Station Area Plan that corresponds to the real estate market is also a challenge, especially if transit is perceived as a “silver bullet” that will solve existing development problems. As Berger notes, “New transit is not going to generate enough traffic to change the entire real estate dynamic but it offers the ability to do pedestrian-oriented development that otherwise wouldn’t have occurred.”

Implementation

In its Strategic Plan for Transit Oriented Development, RTD outlines the roles and responsibilities for TOD implementation by RTD, local governments, developers and regional stakeholders. RTD has many roles in the process: as a landowner, development partner in joint development, planning partner, property seller/lessee and construction facilitator. The role of local governments is to facilitate the community process, provide transit supportive planning, zoning and permits and use other implementation tools such as urban design guidelines, building infrastructure and managing parking. Regional stakeholders offer research, support or input on optimal solutions for TOD implementation. Both RTD and local governments are responsible for TOD coordination; however with the extensive effort put into clearly defining roles and responsibilities, the large-scale TOD implementation effort seems more manageable.

Although the Strategic Plan identifies joint development as a tool to be used cooperatively by RTD and developers, it has proved to be a challenge for Denver. It became a hot button issue under the anti-*eminent domain* debate; to avoid political conflict, RTD has shied away transferring private land it has acquired to other private entities.

Another joint development challenge is RTD’s policy of one-for-one parking replacement, which is often the only opportunity for joint development. “Turning a parking lot into structured parking is virtually impossible to make that pencil,” Berger states. “You can’t replace 100 percent of the parking.” Berger also reflected on the longer term impact of building more than just parking, “There are huge benefits to generating development to create more than just commuter trips. You don’t have to maintain other people’s buildings like you have to maintain a park and ride.” The marginal cost to provide a trip for one more off-peak rider is nothing – and TOD can help generate non-commuter trips to flatten ridership peaks.



The town center in Stapleton provides quality public realm improvements.

RTD's Strategic Plan states that RTD can provide infrastructure directly related to a transit project or part of shared infrastructure with joint development, while developers are expected to provide the primary funding for infrastructure in joint development.

So far most new development has occurred in and around downtown where pedestrian friendly infrastructure is already in place. Many stations outside of downtown will have some major infrastructure challenges to provide quality pedestrian infrastructure along existing roads or to build new roads through large sites. Berger recommends, "Don't underestimate infrastructure costs – have a realistic understanding of the cost for new streets, sidewalks, stormwater systems and utilities. Financing infrastructure may need partnerships, TIF or other unique financing tools." He notes that a lack of infrastructure planning was one of the limitations of Denver's planning efforts and suggested that future station area plans would be a good way to price infrastructure and identify funding options.

The Strategic Plan also identifies opportunities for the input of regional stakeholders as advisory groups and avenues for outreach and education. Two of the major regional partners include the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) and the Economic Development Corporation (which represents regional business interests). Educational efforts have occurred through a variety of groups including local chapters of the Urban Land Institute, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and the American Planning Association. For example, the local AIA chapter created a 60 minute movie about TOD and has organized screenings of the movie along with a panel discussion to follow for neighborhoods going through TOD planning.

Public education is still a major effort throughout the Denver region. Berger expresses what he often tells neighborhood groups, "Look, its TOD – it's a different kind of animal with less [vehicle] trip generation, less parking, and the community can get amenities like parks or neighborhood retail with new development." He noted that it can be a difficult argument to make, especially in mature neighborhoods, without teaching people about TOD first.

Another public education effort is the Transit Alliance, a non-profit that gives a forum for citizen activists to voice their opinions on issues related to transit in Denver. Anyone interested in attending can apply for a weekly class if they receive a referral by someone who has graduated. The weekly class is taught over seven weeks, featuring lectures by planners, developers and other people involved in the TOD process. The people taking the classes are a mix of residents, government officials, planners, housing advocates and others. Each person identifies an action plan they are passionate about, then after 'graduation' they receive support to carry their action plan forward. As Rebekah Kik, a Transit Alliance lecturer and urban designer for Glatting Jackson describes, "One of the exercises we encourage is to ride the light rail and evaluate several stations on a list of criteria: Comfort, Safety, Vibrancy, Design and Connected. This is an extremely inclusive process and each plan is always encouraged to be thought of as 'People Oriented Places.'"



Denver's LoDo neighborhood has experienced significant new development in recent years.
Source: www.flickr.com