



KEEPING DEVELOPMENT RIGHT ON TRACK

With environment in mind, towns encourage housing near rail lines

By ANIKA SINGH LEMAR

In the scramble to address climate change, state and municipal governmental agencies, private developers, and local communities—both in Connecticut and nationwide—are increasingly turning to “transit-oriented development” or “TOD,” which situates housing close to public transportation and commercial and retail amenities.

By incorporating mixed uses and density, TOD ensures that walking and bicycling are reasonable transportation options and that there is sufficient ridership to sustain the public transit at the center of a development. This type of planning discourages the use of cars and their associated carbon emissions, which account for almost one-fifth of greenhouse gas emissions in the United States.

Developers, in turn, are adapting to and benefiting from this trend because it typically allows greater housing and population densities than does traditional residential zoning. In addition, TOD often allows for flexible parking standards which enable developers to construct fewer parking spaces per unit, and thereby reduce costs, due to sharing spaces between shoppers during the day and residents at night and the ability of some shoppers to walk to stores from their homes.

In Connecticut, municipalities with access to commuter rails have a particularly enticing opportunity to embrace transit-oriented development. For example, Guilford has formulated a comprehensive plan for developing its downtown that calls for consideration of multi-family residential and

mixed-use developments in the vicinity of the town’s train station. This station provides commuter rail access to New Haven, New York, and New London.

Larger municipalities, like Stamford and New Haven, have likewise prioritized developments and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure near their busy train stations to take advantage of their rail connections to New York, Boston, and beyond. New Haven is working with the state Department of Transportation to reconfigure Union Station, its central train station, to include new retail, commercial, and residential space. Becker & Becker broke ground in late 2008 on 360 State Street, a 32-story residential tower across the street from the State Street Station, one of New Haven’s two train stations. New Haven is currently negotiating an agreement for the development of a mixed-use, 4.5-acre parcel located about one-half mile from Union Station. The site is expected to include a regional theater as well as residential and office space.

In Stamford, Jonathan Rose Companies and Antares Investment Partners are constructing mixed-use projects close to the city’s downtown central train station, which provides commuter access to New York and New Haven as well as regional access on Amtrak. In mid-2008, Jonathan Rose Companies broke ground on Metro Green Apartments, the first phase of a residential and commercial development located one block from the Stamford train station. Antares Investment Partners has embarked on a \$3 billion redevelopment of a formerly industrial 80-acre brownfield site in Stamford’s South End and within walking distance of the central train station. Antares



anticipates that, when completed, the development, known as Harbor Point, will include six million square feet of residential, hotel, retail, office, and recreational space.

Various municipalities, including Stamford, Fairfield and Redding, have asked the state and public transit organizations to invest in new train stations. In addition, they have planned for new, dense development around these proposed train stations. In Redding, the Georgetown Land Development Co. plans to construct residential and commercial space on a former factory site. A central component of this brownfield development is a revived train station.

Towns without rail amenities can also utilize land-use tools to decrease automobile dependence. For example, Hamden officials expect to implement a hybrid type of zoning in 2009, incorporating “form-based” zoning alongside use-based restrictions in a newly proposed code. “Form-based” zoning, also known as a “SmartCode,” regulates building size and setbacks, the interface between streets and buildings, and the scale

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of development and streets, rather than defining zones according to “traditional” uses (residential, commercial, industrial, etc.).

As a result, form-based zoning permits mixed uses which, in turn, encourage walking because residences and stores are close to each other. In addition, the proposed code will ease parking restrictions. For example, the new code will allow on-street parking to count towards minimum parking requirements and will allow property owners to share parking spaces among mixed uses. If enacted, Hamden’s zoning ordinance will be the first SmartCode in New England.

Funding Incentives

Although land use regulation is typically local, some state governments have also entered the fray by encouraging overarching land use goals and requirements to combat the effects of climate change.

Since 2005, Connecticut law has required regional planning agencies to identify potential sites for TOD. For example, the Housatonic Valley Regional Plan of Conservation and Development has identified eight sites; some of these sites incorporate existing train stations, while others would require the construction of new stations. More recently, the General Assembly has authorized funding for TOD planning, development and implementation. The applicable state statute defines TOD as residential, commercial, and employment centers that are within one-half mile or walking distance of “public transportation facilities,” such as bus and rail lines.

Last fall, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed into law an anti-sprawl measure. The law establishes green-

house gas emission reduction goals for land use planning. It will also require regional transportation plans to include sustainability strategies designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from cars and light trucks. California will provide financial incentives to local governments that build more compact neighborhoods and that otherwise develop land consistent with these plans, subject to certain exemptions.

Voluntary Standard

Recognizing the effect that neighborhood-level land use choices can have on energy consumption, the U.S. Green Building Council has expanded its LEED rating system to include a program specifically tailored to neighborhood development. This new standard would supplement the council’s widely used standards for environmentally-sensitive buildings. The “LEED-ND” rating system, in its pilot form, rewards developments that are compact, utilize brownfield sites, reduce automobile dependence, include mixed uses, and are located close to housing, jobs, and schools.

Six Connecticut developments, including Stamford Metro Green, Harbor Point, Georgetown Land Development, and 360 State Street (New Haven), have applied for certification under the pilot LEED-ND system. The pilot program is no longer accepting new projects. The Green Building Council expects to launch the permanent LEED-ND rating system this summer.

Climate change and the cost of energy are affecting land use choices and real estate development in Connecticut and nation-

LAND USE & ENVIRONMENTAL LAW

wide. In the public sector, municipalities, states and the federal government are increasingly seeking to encourage more efficient use of land, transportation resources, and infrastructure.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act included \$8.4 billion for investments in public transportation, \$9.5 billion for investments in rail and \$1.5 billion in competitive grants to states and local government for transportation systems. Also, last month the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Transportation announced a partnership intended to integrate housing, transportation and land use policy. The Senate Committee on Housing, Banking and Urban Affairs is currently tackling the issue of expanding transit options and providing linkages between housing and transit.

Similarly, in the private sector, developers are seeking to entice residents and businesses to sites that provide access to multiple transportation options, including transit and walking. As a result, development that is accessible by transit and provides for pedestrian access to commercial and retail uses is gradually becoming more available. In light of limited energy resources and increasing federal focus on public transportation, it is likely that compact, transit-oriented development will accelerate as the nation’s attention becomes increasingly focused on addressing the challenges due to climate change. ■