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Build It Near Transit, Diversity Will Come

by Broderick Perkins

If you build it near transit, they will come bringing more ethnic and socio-economic diversity than that of most other neighborhoods.

Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) is getting a new boost from the diverse breakdown of those who choose the drive-less and walk-more style of housing.

"Preserving and Promoting Diverse Transit-Oriented Neighborhoods", a new study of 41 regions -- 32 with transit systems and nine planning to install them -- reveals a deep level of racial and income-based diversity that surpasses the diversity of the surrounding neighborhoods and overall regions.

And it doesn't matter if the housing is urban or suburban. If it's transit oriented expect a diverse crowd. The desire to drive less is pretty universal.

Funded by the Ford Foundation and researched by the Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT), the TOD report says, spurred by high gas prices, gridlock frustrations, and new development, public transit use has grown by 25 percent nationwide since 1995.

The renewed interest in public transit comes at a time when the increasing costs of infrastructure has forced more infill type development placing homes where infrastructure -- including public transit -- already exists. The convergence has prompted planners, community visionaries and neighborhood engineers to develop not just homes, but mixed-use developments that include retail, recreation (parks and walking areas) and other services that further enhance a public transit oriented lifestyle.

Recent reports, including the Center For Transit Oriented Development's "Hidden in Plain Sight: Capturing the Demand for Housing Near Transit" say TODs are key to housing growth, given growing greenbelt and sprawl restrictions.

CNT's TOD report sought to determine who's moving into areas near transit and who is expected to live there in the next 25 years.

Here's what it found.

- Eighty-six percent of transit zones are either more economically diverse, more racially diverse or more diverse on both points than the average census tract, when the comparison is urban vs. urban tracts in the same region and suburban vs. suburban tracts in the same region. However, a greater proportion of central city transit zones are more racially diverse than an average central city census tract, while a greater proportion of suburban transit zones are more economically diverse than an average

suburban census tract.

- Fifty-nine percent of residents near transit are non-whites. The study did not examine why but surmised that the wide range of amenities that cluster around transit stations, in addition to transit itself, is an attractive lure to segments of the housing market across all incomes, suggesting mixed-income housing strategies work on a market basis, no merely as "social engineering."
- Neighborhoods near transit provide housing to a greater share of the region's lower-income households than regions overall. That's because the transit infrastructure helps these households get where they need to go, while keeping their transportation costs down.
- One-person households dominate the neighborhood, accounting for 35 percent of households in transit zones, compared to 26 percent nationally. Four-plus person households account for 23 percent of households in transit zones.
- Transit zones have a greater than average proportion of home owners who spend more than 30 percent of income on housing: 35 percent versus 31 percent for those who don't live in transit zones. The report says that's because home values are relatively higher near transit, making affordable home ownership opportunities near transit more limited on average than in neighborhoods more than a half mile from transit.
- Transit zones allow people to drive less. In 75 percent of transit zones, households have one car or less. In some small transit systems, fully 100 percent of transit zones house a majority of households with one car or less. This rate of auto ownership is true for higher- and lower-income households. In some out lying areas with little access to public transit, other studies have shown, the cost of transportation exceeds the cost of housing.
- Households near transit commute by transit more than three times the rate of households in the transit regions. Their transit use is supported in part by higher densities, which are on average nearly twice that of the average densities for regions with transit, and in many places multiple times that of surrounding neighborhoods further from the transit station. This reduces congestion on the roads, fossil fuel consumption and air pollution from auto emissions.

The report predicts as transit systems expand, transit zones will begin to look more and more like today's non transit zones -- they will have a greater proportion of married-couple households and a lower proportion of single- and non-family households. Changes in demographics, household preferences and in the way regions are developed and how housing and transportation are planned with shift the proportions, the TOD study says.

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