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INTRODUCTION

The City of Albany and the Capital District Transportation Authority (CDTA) are reprioritizing the role of public transportation in the city. This is being accomplished through the implementation of new Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service along important transportation corridors through the city. The first such BRT line to be implemented in Albany, the Route 905 Bus Plus, has seen great success since it began operation in the spring of 2011. Ridership along this route has grown more quickly than others in the system and businesses along the Central Avenue corridor have seen a growth in activity as well. Among the many transportation benefits of quicker more dependable trips, BRT systems also bring additional economic benefits to the corridors in which they are located. This locational advantage this is associated with enhanced transit access is referred to as Transit-oriented Development (TOD). TOD is most often associated with the rail infrastructure associated with subway or commuter rail transit, but studies have shown that BRT stations provide the same advantages for nearby properties.

Over the next few years, CDTA and the City of Albany will be investigating and implementing further expansions to the BRT network with potential routes added along the River Corridor and the Washington/Western Corridor. The River Corridor runs north and south along North Broadway and Pearl Streets and is projected for implementation in 2015, The Washington/Western Corridor is projected for implementation in 2017 and would run along either Western or Washington Avenue from downtown west toward UAlbany. This growing BRT network will create a new dynamic for development within the City, this planning process is intended to establish the tools for needed for Albany to take full advantage of transit-oriented development in the future.

The four study corridors share many of the same attributes:

- Area demographics within a quarter or half mile pick-up the same neighborhoods
- The streets are two or three travel lanes in most areas and buses operate in mixed traffic rather than High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) or bus-dedicated lanes.
- Development parcel sizes are relatively small, making larger scale development more difficult.
- Commute times and freeway access to the outlying Albany suburbs are relatively good, making use of the bus more likely by persons living within walking distance of the bus line.
- Increased frequency and decreased travel times on the BRT make for creation of the “corridor lifestyle,” where access to other uses within a 10 minute ride in either route direction are readily accessible, rather than a 10 minute walk, which might have been the preferred mode prior to the BRT service.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this planning study was to examine the potential benefits to the City of Albany through encouraging transit-oriented development. The link between enhanced transportation networks, bus rapid transit, and land use advantages is clear, but the characteristics of potential development should align with TOD to best utilize that advantage. Primarily, transit-oriented development is focused upon the creation of walkable, pedestrian-friendly places that support many activities and many modes of transportation. Specifically, this study examined the types of incentives that would encourage transit-oriented development at targeted locations in Albany and examined possible zoning modifications that would better align the land uses and development characteristics with the potential for creating walkable transit-oriented nodes within the city. This planning process was a direct result of the Albany 2030 Comprehensive Plan that recommended...
pursuing transit-oriented development as a way to achieve the plan goals of safe and livable neighborhoods, a vibrant urban center, and multi-modal transportation in a green city with a prosperous economy. Transit-oriented development directly addresses each of these desired outcomes.

Transit-oriented development is target development that has an orientation near transit stations. For the purposes of this study of BRT related development, a one quarter mile radius from the stations was considered near transit. This type of development is intended to create high quality and vibrant places that support walking, transit and multiple and diverse uses. This type of focused residential and commercial activity near BRT stations encourages transit ridership and creates a viable alternative to personal automobile use for daily trips. This type of development prioritizes a pedestrian-oriented scale and design of streets and buildings and can support and enhance existing neighborhoods near BRT stations.

PROCESS

In 2012, the City of Albany engaged in a planning process to examine the potential benefits and characteristics of zoning modifications that would encourage transit-oriented development. The Department of Development and Planning (DDP) worked with a team of consultants including urban planners, architects, transportation and environmental, and real estate economic specialists to develop this approach to transit-oriented development. The planning process included an extensive outreach and communication process with the general public and potential stakeholders. The consultant team facilitated a series of roundtable discussions, community forums, public charrettes and presentations to gather important and diverse feedback that informed the outcomes of this process. The planning process was also guided by a Study Advisory Committee composed of members from DDP, Capital District Transportation Authority (CDTA), Capitalize Albany, Capital District Transportation Committee (CDTC), Albany Parking Authority, Albany Police Department Traffic Engineering, and the Capital District Regional Planning Commission (CDRPC). The preliminary results of this planning process were presented to the Albany Common Council in September of 2012 to introduce the subject and receive feedback that could be integrated into the final documentation of the process.

METHODOLOGY

The consultant team analyzed both the city context and specific BRT station areas to understand the parameters by which transit-oriented development may be most successful in Albany. The overall building, open space and development patterns of the city were combined with an overall market analysis and understanding of the development context. The team also reviewed the potential environmental implications of potential zoning modifications to better understand the implementation process as it pertains to SEQR and NEPA regulations.

As a part of the planning process, the consultant team developed an inventory and classification of the characteristics of the BRT stations within the City of Albany based upon existing and proposed routes at the time of this study. Three stations in the BRT network were selected with the Advisory Committee to test transit-oriented development planning ideas in detail. The test locations include a proposed station on the River Corridor at Clinton and Broadway, and two existing stations on the Central Avenue Corridor at Central and Quail and Central and North Manning/North Allen. The three stations were used to develop design standards and test the feasibility of potential development. The final result of this process of testing potential transit-oriented development characteristics is Draft Overlay Zone language for each of the three station areas.

DOCUMENTS

This final report includes several distinct, but closely related deliverables. The primary document is the City of Albany Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Guidebook. The TOD Guidebook is organized to provide a toolkit for future transit-oriented development planning and implementation in the city and offers the tools necessary to create targeted transit-oriented development districts in the city and provides illustrations of potential development scenarios in the three TOD station areas that were tested. A companion to the TOD Guidebook is draft Overlay Zone Language. This draft language provides a first step in implementing zoning modi-
fications in the three target station areas to test these ideas in practice with pilot overlay zones. The remaining documents provide more technical materials from the planning process that further illustrate the methods that were used to advance the process and thinking.

PILOT TOD OVERLAY ZONES

This planning study proposed the creation of three pilot TOD zoning districts within the City to test revised zoning characteristics. The three pilot TOD zones are representative of three varying conditions found in many other locations throughout the City, ranging from a high-density downtown transit node, to a mid-density neighborhood transit node to a low-density commercial and transit corridor. Each Pilot TOD Overlay Zone includes recommended changes to zoning that would incentivize nodes of high residential and commercial activity near the bus rapid transit station locations. The three locations Clinton and Broadway, Quail and Central and Central and North Manning/North Allen are described in more detail below.

The downtown transit node at Clinton Avenue and Broadway features:

- An open space, Wallenburg Park at its center, with the Corning City Preserve and Hudson Riverfront Park at the eastern edge of the node
- Interstate entries and exits as a defining feature that provide excellent vehicular access
- Office high-rises for state, federal and private commercial uses
- The Palace Theatre and Cap Rep provide cultural anchors for the node
- The eastern edges of the Arbor Hill residential neighborhood are also located within the node

This zone will have the following characteristics:

- Mixed residential and commercial with an emphasis on cultural and entertainment uses
- Increased allowable building heights and residential densities
- Active ground floor uses, with parking internal to development blocks

The type of mixed-use neighborhood center at the transit node located at Central Avenue and Quail Street has the following features:

- Added value as a commercial center because Quail is a cross-connecting street that makes important connections north-south across the City.
- The mixed-use neighborhood transit node planned for Central Avenue and Quail has minimal public open space
- Dense commercial activity at Central Avenue
- Residential neighborhoods on the adjacent secondary street network

This zone will have the following characteristics:

- Mixed residential and commercial with an emphasis on ground floor retail and restaurants at Central Avenue
- Increased allowable building heights and residential densities in the blocks adjacent to Central Avenue
- Continuous pedestrian connections and bicycle routes on side streets

The commercial corridor at Central Avenue near North Manning and North Allen Streets has the following features:

- The transit corridor in this location is a higher speed, higher traffic volume roadway that is wider and less safe and pleasant for pedestrian activity
- The node includes a mix of lower scale residential and commercial uses, commercial uses are transitioning to auto-oriented uses (drive-thru restaurants, auto dealerships, large format retail)
- Residential neighborhoods are located on either side of the transit corridor

This zone will have the following characteristics:

- A collection of residential and commercial development at Central Avenue with less emphasis on mixed-use projects
- An increased residential density on secondary streets
- Enhanced pedestrian and bicycle amenities on Central Avenue and connecting perpendicular streets into the surrounding neighborhoods
- An emphasis on open space and landscape will enhance the district as a walkable neighborhood
MARKET ANALYSIS AND FEASIBILITY TESTING

A critical component of transit-oriented development is the development. The consultant team examined the real estate market in Albany to fit zoning modifications or other incentives into a realistic picture of what is currently possible. No single change can ensure that private investment will occur in any particular location, the summary below describes the current market conditions that the consultant team analyzed as they relate to transit-oriented development in 2012.

The Capital District is comprised of four counties—Albany, Schenectady, Rensselaer, and Saratoga- with a combined population of around 850,000. From 2000 to 2010 the Capital region grew almost 44,000 persons or around 1,500 households/year. The three major cities of Albany, Troy and Schenectady dominate the four county area, although only about a quarter of the population resides within the three cities. In other words, the residents live mainly in the suburbs and the automobile is the dominant means of transportation. The interstate and arterial networks work relatively well, and, while they exhibit congestion at peak periods, average commute trips are less than 30 minutes.

Over the same period, the U.S. Census reports that the City of Albany grew by about 2,200 persons, comprising 400 new households, to around 98,000 persons. That translates to 41,000 households, according to the 2010 U.S. Census. And there are around 129,000 jobs in the city, or 3.1 jobs for every household. Our market experience around the country suggests that TOD is most appealing in urban locations where the jobs-to-household ratio is around 1:1. So Albany has an enormous competitive advantage, other things being equal. That is, many of those working in Albany would be interested in finding a place to live in Albany under the right circumstances. This is why the housing vacancy rate is among the lowest in the nation. The problem is that other things are not equal, as explained below.

The BRT lines that are being evaluated run from the eastern edge of Albany to the northwest and generally connect Schenectady with Albany and the SUNY/nanotechnology campuses to downtown. Both termini of the BRT lines have existing, larger-scale residential or employment uses currently.

Since the three BRT lines as proposed are relatively close together, the demographics in a quarter or half mile radius are not materially different. Differences in mixes of use and density, therefore, are most important in understanding potential TOD development schemes at the nodes along the BRT routes. The TOD Guidebook examines in great detail how those various prototypical development nodes could be expanded, and encouraged.

This market analysis and feasibility testing looks at the marketplace along the BRT corridors and points out the “enablers and challenges” relating to making TOD work. Generally, because Albany has experienced limited growth in the last decade as noted above, new development projects have been concentrated to a few areas around a limited number of industries—medical, education, and technology. While it is difficult to generalize, here are some overall conclusions by use:

Office: The main employer in the City of Albany is the State of New York. It is downsizing and “restacking” its existing offices. An addition, since the 2008 Great Recession, many businesses have been downsizing and reducing the space allocated per employee, resulting in a shadow inventory related to subleasing. Some demand exists for specialized space, like high tech or bio-medical. The new Nanotechnology Campus to the northwestern part of the City is an example. Another positive aspect, private businesses have added new jobs at about the level to cover the public sector losses.

Residential: Albany has a very low vacancy rate overall, because not much new development has been forthcoming in the last decade and because of the jobs/housing imbalance. Existing older stock within Albany is relatively inexpensive compared to other second tier metropolitan areas. Property tax rates in the City are among the highest in the region. The unoccupied building rates for Albany are going up, suggesting there is some abandonment of lower quality buildings. Despite high costs of new construction, new residential apartment projects have been built and others proposed in the last year. The major attraction is downtown living, convenience to entertainment and cultural attractions, and greater building amenities, that allow developers to charge higher rents than seen prior in most downtown locations.
Retail: Some downtown retail exists for convenience shopping to those working there. Most larger national brand chains are in the suburban malls in neighboring communities to Albany. Once a critical threshold of new residents is reached downtown, more opportunities for new retail will present themselves. We believe eventually that there may be an opportunity for an “urban life style center” of over 100,000 square feet, anchored by national brands, that would appeal to the downtown residents and employees alike. The shopping centers along Route 5 have some national retailers, but are mainly populated by local merchandisers.

TOD integration with transit will most likely be enabled with the following attributes at the most attractive sites:

- Physical amenities for both residents and employees
- Attractive and safe surroundings, conducive to walking
- Local services are available nearby
- Other reasons exist to be there, that is, adjacent or nearby destinations
- At a minimum, local-serving convenience retail, and larger-scale retail desirable
- Market momentum and developer interest.

Albany BRT has some unique qualifiers--potentially different from other transit modes, that, if actualized, would lead to more BRT ridership and therefore TOD potential along the lines:

- BRT is perceived as faster than other travel modes available in that travel corridor
- The two ends of the BRT line have larger-scale development, making for trips in both directions at peak, and more demand potential from both directions for in-fill along the entire BRT line
- A full mix of retail is located along the BRT line, particularly at the BRT stops, so residents can obtain local services without getting in their cars or not compelled to walk too far
- Other transit lines that provide access to other employment or residential centers (like to the medical complex to the south) coordinate schedules in order to facilitate timely transfers

- Other larger sites and/or sites with surplus parking are available in order to minimize project assembly or parking structure costs, respectively.

Challenges to successful TOD on Albany BRT lines relate to:

- Relatively low property values and rent levels in the corridors served by the BRT, coupled with high construction costs, mean that new development generally needs some form of subsidy or some amenity package that allows for charging higher rent levels or valuations than existing norms.
- High tax rates within the City of Albany relative to other suburban markets where the majority of the region’s residents live make for-sale condominiums the most improbable residential product of choice.
- Perceptions that some neighborhoods abutting BRT lines may not be safe.

The lower density prototype development nodes of Central and Quail and North Manning/North Allen could be positioned to accommodate new mixed-use and residential projects that have unique amenity packages for residents, like in-house exercise facilities, party rooms, common-area living rooms, pools, views, etc. that would allow developers to charge premium rents that cover new construction costs. The same is at least as true for the higher density prototypical node, Clinton and Broadway, because of proximity to other destinations and attractions for the region. Most of these new projects will do better in the market place with some form of public subsidy, in order to make the sales or rental rates more competitive with the economics of already built space.

In the area around Clinton and Broadway, a new residential apartment project has just been completed and another is proposed—a very encouraging indication that, after this long hiatus in residential construction, the development community is responding to the documented pent-up demand for residential product downtown. Hopefully other mixed-use products of larger-scale will materialize as well—all benefiting from BRT serving this downtown hub and all the other areas along the BRT corridors. And BRT will provide better linkages to the new nano-tech employment center and university campus on the other side of the City—the potential
for a “reverse commute.” If Cleveland’s BRT Health Line is any indication of economic benefit, many locations along the BRT routes should see new development over time that probably would not have occurred otherwise.

CONCLUSIONS

Encouraging compact walkable and highly livable neighborhoods is a well-supported and achievable goal. The synergy between enhanced access to high quality transit and increased development activity is likely to occur over the near and long term future of Albany. The investments in the transportation infrastructure for Albany’s bus rapid transit system will initiate other beneficial modifications to land use patterns near the stations. However, the characteristics of enhanced transportation and access are only one half of the TOD equation, pedestrian-oriented, walkable and vibrant development is the other half. It is critical to reexamine the land use regulations and incentives that are currently in place to better align them with this future. The more closely matched the characteristics of zoning are to the desired vision of the future the more likely the benefits will be enjoyed by the community.

The Pilot TOD Overlay Zones at Clinton and Broadway, Central and Quail, and Central and North Manning/North Allen propose several important modifications to the underlying zoning. Broadly speaking, the modifications fall into a few categories, increasing entitlements, adding site and building design standards to enhance the pedestrian environment and reducing parking requirements. Important to both the pedestrian environment, transit use and the feasibility of development is creating a critical mass of high quality positive activity at these locations. Once a momentum is established for transit-oriented development, the potential benefits of future projects will become more apparent. The ability to attain this type of momentum may require additional public investments in streetscape, public art or other financial mechanisms to bridge the gap that may exist in the current marketplace to unlock many shared advantages for the future.

Unlocking the shared community benefits of transit-oriented development involves many parties acting together and if properly coordinated can result in great public, private, community and economic benefits for all. From a development and land owner perspective, drawing attention to these transit-rich locations in the City and targeting investments in these locations can create the ability to develop a critical mass of high quality walkable assets that differentiate residential and commercial products in the market. Coordinating this with a realigned set of public policies, including the zoning and a collection of thoughtful incentives creates a momentum by which both public and private investments can be leveraged to have a greater impact for the good of the City and community than if they were invested in a less coordinated and purposeful manner.

Based upon analysis of the overall market context of the City of Albany and a testing of transit oriented development concepts at each of the three pilot overlay zone areas, the consultant team has reached the following conclusions that should be used to inform development and policy decisions looking forward:

- Of the three pilot nodes, Clinton and Broadway have the most short term potential for substantial redevelopment. The number of large-scale vacant parcels in this location creates an opportunity for a scale of development that cannot easily be achieved in other locations of the City. The scale of the development is critically important in the context of the current market in Albany, if a critical mass of new residential units and retail space can begin to anchor a new high quality pedestrian district with access to downtown and amenities. Such a development may be able to attract higher rents and thus shift large-scale development on these sites toward profitability.

- To bring along appropriate catalyst development projects that would create a more walkable and dense transit-oriented station area in any of these locations, some form of subsidy, incentives, or other public investments will likely be required. Many of these type of programs are highlighted in the TOD Guidebook.

- The potential creation of overlay zones, development of incentive programs and outreach and coordination with the development community could change the context of the current market in Albany at these targeted locations so that new projects are initiated in the next several years to reinforce a new model of transit-oriented growth in the City.