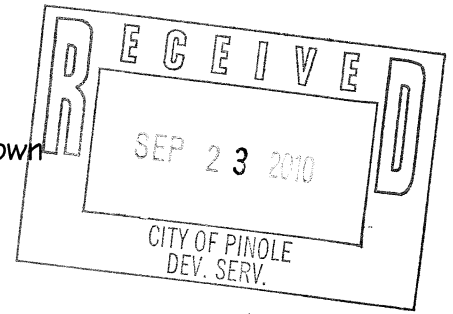


Dense Development versus Transition Town
Looking Forward in Pinole



Core proposals in the new Pinole General Plan are based on planning concepts that evolved over decades, variously termed Smart Growth, Transit Oriented Development, and New Urbanism. Although different in emphasis, they all share a focus on revitalizing or recreating central urban downtown areas in a style that promotes reduced automobile use. Archetypes for variations on this theme are typically city centers built in the days of trolleys and trains that lost business to freeway related shopping malls. In many ways this planning form has evolved into a social cause supported by an emotional belief system. Writings promoting this belief system often passionately endorse intensity (taller buildings) and density (buildings closer together). For purposes of this discussion I will call the conceptual system Dense Development - DD .

The agenda behind DD has many threads, most laudable. In particular it is opposed to suburban sprawl, certainly vehemently objecting to any new suburban tracts. DD also sees reduced vehicle miles traveled (VMT's) as essential to meeting lower fuel consumption goals in a time of climate change and peak oil. DD also recognizes the importance of protecting farmland as a key element, at least potentially, in a de-globalized, re-localized food infrastructure. Also, some DD activists promote walking and bicycling instead of automobile use as public health benefits that could reduce many forms of illnesses now prevalent due to sedentary lifestyles.

In Northern California these themes were picked up and promoted in a collaboration between ABAG (Association of Bay Area Governments, MTC (Metropolitan Transportation Commission, BCDC (Bay Conservation and Development Development Commission}), and the State Air Resources Board. Their program of outreach to local governments is called FOCUS. The objective of FOCUS is to relate new construction to public transit routes. The MTC website has good information on projects where this approach has been built out. In general their emphasis has been on TOD (Transit Oriented Development), which can occur in two ways: at nodes, where transit routes converge; or along transit corridors that have frequent stops for buses or trolleys.

Typically the new construction completed under FOCUS programs is four to five stories at very high densities, with little private outdoor space. One of the leaders of the TOD wing of DD theory is Peter Calthorpe, now in Portland but formerly a solar architect based in Marin. Peter is adamant that people need to undergo a behavior change where

their outdoor experiences are in public spaces, shared, with private outdoor space sacrificed to the greater good that arise from density and intensity.

A modest amount of data supports the idea that DD development based at transit nodes (often called Transit Villages) may be associated with reduced automobile use, although the causality connecting the two has not been established. Perhaps these DD nodes attract residents who do not want or cannot afford a car. In that case what appears to be a low car use neighborhood is offset by car users who have simply moved to other neighborhoods more friendly to their needs, with no overall regional benefit. To meet the broader goals of supporting a neighborhood economy accessed without cars, a node-based TOD needs to have a minimum size (by one estimate about 50 small city blocks). A typical example of a Transit Village based on a node arrangement is the Jack London Square area of Oakland. Since many of the buildings there are old industrial structures far larger than the new mixed use townhouses built in places like Emeryville, the number of blocks to achieve required density is fewer than 50.

The MTC website discusses only one project formed along a transit corridor, rather than a node. This is a section of San Pablo Avenue in San Pablo where AC transit committed long-term to express bus service at 12 minute intervals during peak commute hours. While a Transit Oriented Development, the San Pablo corridor meets few other criteria of Smart Growth or New Urbanism. One of their core principles, essential to non-vehicular urban development, is called connectivity. This means that many streets containing significant destinations must radiate from transit hubs, which is not the case along San Pablo Avenue, except perhaps in parts of Berkeley. While the FOCUS program has targeted almost all of San Pablo avenue for dense development along bus routes, corridor based intense development remains speculative and unproven.

In particular corridor based TOD has two serious problems. First, the more the 'strip mall' is developed, the more traffic there is, which impedes rapid transit. If transit is not truly rapid, then it will not be a viable alternative to the automobile. For this reason theorists are now turning to dedicated rights of way, especially in the form of trolley tracks, as a vision of the future. As a former rider of both buses and trolleys in San Francisco for more than a decade (the MUNI system), I can say that this vision has problems with operational realities. A recent poll showed that San Franciscans are enraged at the poor function of their transit system. When was that ever not the case?

In terms of transit, DD universally overlooks the dependency on elevators created by requiring four and five stories as the new norms. Elevators become central to the DD

system. Having had businesses in two San Francisco locations served by elevators, for well over a decade, I can say that elevator maintenance and cleanliness cannot be taken for granted. [In one of our buildings ground floor deli deliveries often left debris in the elevator that fell through the gap at the door, making a compost pile of rotting food that attracted rats and roaches to the base of the elevator shaft. The building was managed by a multinational investment bank that never corrected the situation. On one occasion they left the elevator out of operation for six weeks due to communication problems within various internal corporate divisions. This was not in a slum -- we were in the SF Financial district at Sutter and Montgomery, next to the Schwab building.]

DD is not the only belief system developing that expresses heartfelt energy concerns as community alterations. Another more recent but far more comprehensive model comes from the Transition Town movement, which originated in England just a few years ago but has spread worldwide. Transition Town (TT) looks at the same issues of climate change, peak oil, and vehicle use, and comes up with quite different solutions. TT stresses the need to relocalize food production to build what they call resiliency -- community resistance to dislocations of energy and water supply. Within the TT framework, a community is first and foremost a defensive system for basics in the standard of living. Resilience and relocalization call for prominent emphasis on creation of local jobs and banking to keep reliable flows of capital within the community. And they stress gardens, public or private, as a primary resource by which the community protects itself from dislocations of the now-international food infrastructure.

If TT were to have a central principle it would be "First, pave no gardenable land". TT advocates see total system energy use reductions from local food production, cottage industry, and constraint of a debt/banking system (that requires enormous energy use to fund interest payments).

In essence DD and TT both address a central theme of household energy use, or what is often called carbon footprint. The question emerging is when and where is it good to pave a garden to get density that may enhance public transit use. I call it the garden/elevator tradeoff -- take away my ability to grow my own food, but give me access to an elevator.

The PMC planning consultancy has sold Pinole a very expensive social experiment in corridor-based Transit Oriented Development. We are to become a town of elevators, not gardens, in their vision, and should learn to love it because it is good for us. But Dense Development requires a certain scale and arrangement to be successful. Typically

it needs a transit node, not a corridor, surrounded by a large area of mixed use with dozens of commercial destinations scattered throughout the district. In all of the hundreds of pages of documentation, I find no actual data modeling in PMC's Pinole plan to support such a radical transformation. In the PMC vision, entire neighborhoods will be demolished in support of a theory that may have no viable application in our unique instance.

Planning seems to be moving on to a new focus on local food production, absorbing much of the influence of TT thinking. It's an exciting time to be thinking about how we can repair the earth by nourishing each individual plot of land, which ultimately nourishes us as well. This is a good time to reconsider dense development for Pinole. The San Pablo corridor is already congested and will not support rapid transit during peak hours without dedicated transit lanes. The critical scale for DD success is just not available in Pinole's Old Town. We do not want to become another San Pablo, or Hercules. Our identity is much closer to the resilient model of Transition Towns. First, pave no gardens!

Looking forward,

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