

EXCLUSIVE REPORTS

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Higher density gets on track with planners

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In an effort to lure South Floridians out of their cars, Broward County has become the first in the region to create a countywide roadmap for development along Tri-Rail and major bus routes.

The new Transit-Oriented Development land-use designation was cleared by the state last month.

The designation, dubbed TOD, is a fast-moving trend that promises to open up new development opportunities in land-crunched South Florida. By design, these developments are dense, urban centers created around mass transit venues.

At the same time Broward implements a planning structure, the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, the agency overseeing growth in Palm Beach County, is orchestrating the region's first site-specific TOD surrounding the Tri-Rail station in West Palm Beach.

Broward County's broader designation allows mixed-use development within a quarter-mile of any main-line transit site, such as a Tri-Rail station. Cities would still have to adopt the county framework for a TOD to be created.

To earn the designation, a project must include residential and two accompanying commercial components, such as retail, offices, light industrial facilities or a hotel. It also must be designed to encourage pedestrian and transit traffic and discourage cars.

Transit-Oriented Corridors

The county also created a parallel land-use category, called Transit-Oriented Corridors, with similar mixed-use requirements for major bus and transportation routes such as State Road 7.

The South Florida Regional Planning Council, Broward and Miami-Dade counties' regional planner, is working with the 14 local governments that span State Road 7 in Broward to embrace the new TOD designation and the projects that result.

"It allows for dense population on transit corridors so people don't have to have a car. It doesn't mean they won't," said Greg Stuart, assistant director of Broward's urban planning and redevelopment division. "Right now, we don't have a land-use pattern to get rid of our cars."

TOD and its other transit-oriented siblings are hardly a new urban revolution. Congested metropolises in California, Seattle and other areas have been pushing the concept for years.

But it has been only recently that the light bulb went off in South Florida, which is now awash with TOD talk.

Tamarind transformation

West Palm Beach is speeding ahead with what is the first detailed scenario to emerge with its plan to transform 36 acres along Tamarind Avenue into a mixed-use hub.

The land, largely a hodgepodge of state, county and federal property, between Banyan Boulevard and Fern Street could someday host 2,000 residences, 50,000 square feet of retail, more than 500,000 square feet of offices, hotel rooms and a higher-education satellite campus.

The site encircles the West Palm Beach Tri-Rail station. The region's public commuter train runs on CSX rail parallel to I-95.

The Florida East Coast rail corridor, which is further east and dissects the heart of most South Florida downtowns, also is an obvious spot for TODs. But it currently lacks passenger service.

The state has retained planning, design and construction management firm Gannett Fleming to study the prospects of passenger rail on the tracks.

Rapid bus systems and extending Tri-Rail to Jupiter also will be considered in the study, expected to cost at least \$6 million and funded with federal transportation dollars.

Meanwhile, the Tri-Rail line remains the primary focus of TOD projects.

The Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council is now drafting the West Palm Beach TOD, arrived at during a weeklong design charrette, into a formal proposal.

If the city and the agencies controlling the land agree, a call for development proposals could go out as early as this summer, according to Jonathan Pertchik, managing principal of Staubach Co., the real estate consultant hired to conduct a feasible study for creating a TOD at the West Palm Beach Tri-Rail and Amtrak station.

A critical component of the West Palm Beach plan is workforce housing geared toward public safety and government workers, many of whom clog the roads commuting to work each day Pertchik said.

"We have to use the transportation infrastructure more efficiently or we are just going to sit in traffic," he said.

The newfound attention, paired with the possibility of erecting dense transit villages on public land, is catching the eye of private developers, as well.

More development at stations

The state Department of Transportation and the South Florida Regional Transit Authority, which controls land at the region's 18 Tri-Rail stations, are looking at development at stations in Boca Raton, Hollywood and Fort Lauderdale.

But a key to furthering TOD could ultimately lie in negotiations now going on between the DOT and the regional transit authority, which operates Tri-Rail.

The transit authority is seeking to win "beneficial use" of all of the region's stations and park-and-ride sites, said Joe Giulietti, the authority's executive director. That would open up development opportunities at the stations, most of which are now controlled by the state, and the 100-foot corridor that spans either side of the Tri-Rail tracks, he said.

Another promising TOD site is the 11.5-acre park-and-ride site on Cypress Creek Road in Fort Lauderdale.

Coconut Grove-based Swerdlow Group, through a long-term lease with the DOT, controls the site, but Swerdlow has a deal to sell control of the land.

Industry speculation names the buyer as a group involving Michael Masanoff, former co-developer of T-Rex Corporate Center in Boca Raton and a governor-appointed board member of the regional transit authority.

Masanoff declined to confirm his involvement in the buyers' group, but said the Cypress Creek site is ideal for a TOD project. To achieve that, however, the existing development entitlements allowing for offices, telecom and hotel spaces would have to be modified to include residential. So far, no formal push to change the existing plan has been made by any potential buyers, according to DOT officials.

Masanoff is a leading proponent of creating TODs regionwide as a vehicle for improving mass transit and road conditions. He said that giving developers the flexibility and support to make the projects economical feasible for private sector deals will determine their ultimate success.

And these days, that means residential density.

"You need a mix of uses. You need a balance of uses," Masanoff said. "You don't need more commercial."

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