



GREAT PLACES WITH TRANSIT

Winter 2000 – 2001

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What is Transit-Oriented Development?

Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) is mixed-use development consisting of homes, offices, shops, parks or community facilities that have convenient access to a transit line.

About This Newsletter

Communities have been clustered around transportation since the beginning of time. Stage coach stops, train stations and trolley stops all inspired town building. Many of the Philadelphia area's greatest places were constructed around transit: the Main Line, Chestnut Hill, Swarthmore, Doylestown and Center City, just to name a few.

This newsletter, *Great Places with Transit*, is intended to feature local and regional efforts to revive the lost art of creating these places. Society has experimented for more than 50 years with neglecting transit and investing overwhelmingly in auto-dependent communities. The consequence is sprawl, the symptom is congestion and the legacy is places that Americans love to hate, as poll after poll has confirmed.

Americans love vibrant towns with sidewalks filled with people to watch, stores to browse in and lots going on. We love to vacation in places that have these qualities, such as Cape May, NJ; New Hope, PA; Annapolis, MD; and Celebration, FL. So, why doesn't the "marketplace" build more communities like these?

Building great places isn't easy. Building great places with transit can be even trickier. There are several institutional and perceptual barriers: restrictive zoning, lack of financing, conflicting inter-governmental regulation and citizen hostility based on erroneous notions about aspects of transit-friendly development and what is good for the environment.

This newsletter will focus on these issues and set the record straight. We will examine the barriers. We will report on research findings.

We will propose solutions. We will present case studies of success. We will also report on what is happening in this region and across the nation.

One thing is certain: Creating great places with transit as a real estate trend is building momentum in unlikely places – Salt Lake City, UT; Denver, CO; Houston, TX – areas that have been known to be rife with sprawling, out-of-control development for decades. But it's no accident. In places such as these, transit-oriented development (TOD) is a matter of regional and local policy. Specific programs have been established, and funds are flowing to facilitate new development in support of transit and vice versa.

Will the Philadelphia region join the pack? Stay tuned. — Patrick Starr
PEC Regional Director

Station Area Study for Schuylkill Valley Metro

The agencies and stakeholders behind a station-area planning and zoning study for the Schuylkill Valley Metro (SVM) – the proposed fast train line that would carry 50,000 passengers a day between Reading and Philadelphia by 2007 – have begun a key planning phase that emphasizes the input of community representatives in developing areas of transit-oriented development (TOD).

The Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, SEPTA and BARTA, Berks, Chester and Montgomery Counties, the City of Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Environmental Council and the Reinvestment Fund are partners in a two-year study that will explore how the 62-mile SVM would best serve municipalities along its route.

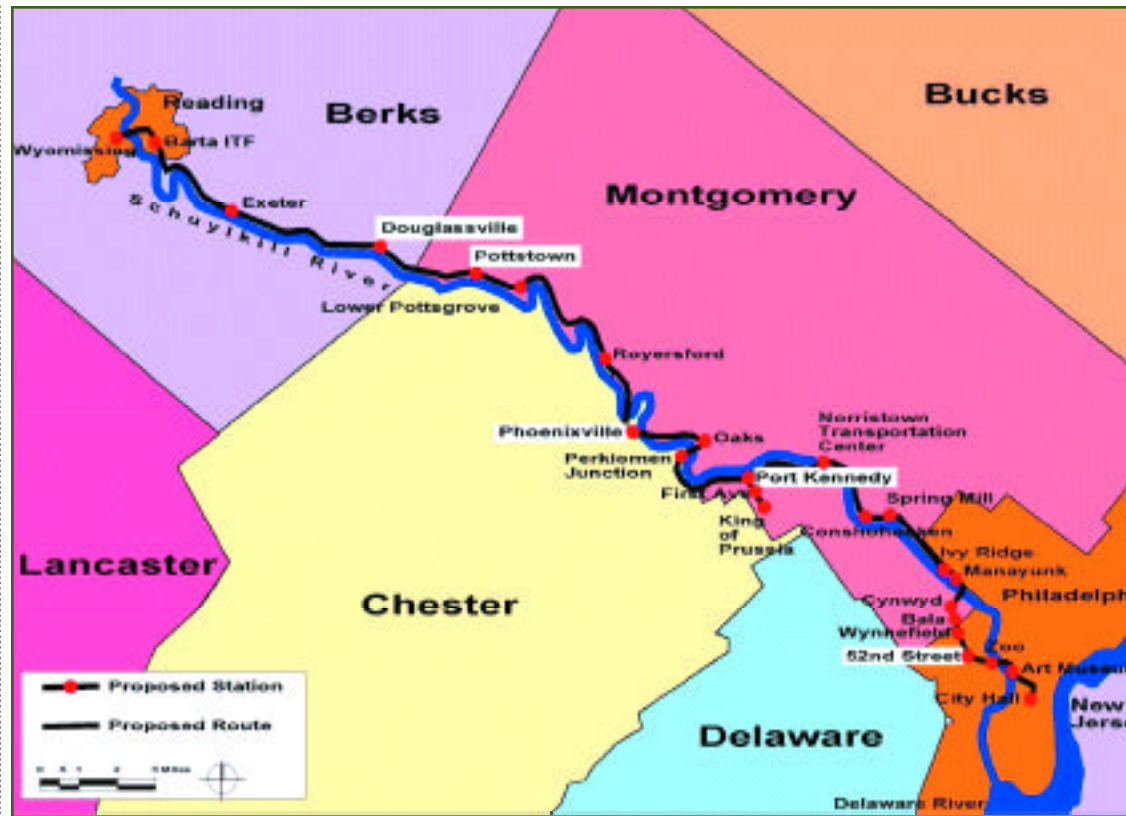
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SEPTA Adopts MetroRail for Schuylkill Valley Metro

After much debate over the various options available for the proposed Schuylkill Valley Metro line, SEPTA has selected "MetroRail", a system that combines some of the features of traditional commuter rail with features of light rail. The MetroRail system was chosen over six other plans for the new train line, which was recently approved by SEPTA's board; construction is slated to begin in 2003.

MetroRail uses environmentally friendly electric cars that can run on the same tracks as freight, Regional Rail and Amtrak trains and thus use the existing Center City Regional Rail tunnel, allowing access to 30th Street, Suburban and Market East Stations. The cars are heavy and crash-resistant and have high platforms to make boarding easier and wheelchair-accessible. Faster and cleaner than traditional diesel-powered trains, the MetroRail system also has the highest estimated ridership of the seven types of train service that were considered for the SVM.

The SVM, which will extend from Philadelphia to Reading in Berks County, would replace SEPTA's R6 line between Center City and Norristown, running every 15 minutes during peak hours and every 30 minutes off-peak. Commuters would be able to travel to 30th Street Station from Reading in 83 minutes, from Phoenixville to Manayunk in 29 minutes, and from King of Prussia to Market East Station in 43 minutes. ■



The proposed route and station stops of the Schuylkill Valley Metro, a new train line that would run from Philadelphia to Berks County.

(Station Area Study, continued from page 1)

Five station areas were selected for the study, and a consultant team has been retained to work with these communities to adopt zoning that supports TODs around the stations. These economically vibrant areas would radiate from five Metro stations: 52nd Street in Philadelphia; Port Kennedy and Pottstown in Montgomery County; Phoenixville in Chester County; and Douglassville in Berks County.

Community task forces will play a crucial role in planning and implementing TODs around the SVM stations. Comprised of local elected officials, planners, business people and representatives of economic development agencies and neighborhood groups, the task forces will brainstorm ideas about station area design and function, discuss transit-related issues and formally review developing plans. The goal of this collaborative effort is to educate task force members so that they, rather than planners and developers, can advocate for the proposed zoning amendments in their communities.

With input from communities and guidance from experts involved in the station-area planning and zoning study, it is hoped that the SVM may one day serve as a prototype for transit systems throughout both the region and the state that will facilitate TODs and help battle sprawl. ■

Phoenixville: Model Transit-Oriented Development

The borough of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, in Chester County may be the new "hot" development site of the 21st century. The future locations of new homes, retail and office spaces lie not on the outskirts of the borough, but downtown. On the site of the former Phoenix Iron and Steel Works, the French Creek Center is planned to be a large mixed-use infill development adjacent to a proposed train station on the SVM and bordered by the French Creek — a model TOD.

In the late 1980s, Phoenixville exemplified the post-industrial age of the Rust Belt. The mill, situated at the center of town, had sat dormant since 1991. As downtown retail was faltering and property values were falling, neglect began to mar some of the attractive residential districts — especially the North Side. Meanwhile, other development had boomed all around the borough. Pharmaceutical headquarters had been built nearby at US

(Phoenixville, continued from page 2)

Route 422 and PA Route 29, while large, national retail stores were built in adjacent Schuylkill Township.

However, a burst of civic energy, sparked in part by Chester County's Landscapes 2020 Comprehensive Plan, brought about the Vision Partnership Task Force. The mission of the Task Force was to plan the revitalization of Phoenixville. With help from the Chester County Planning Commission and energetic community leadership, the Task Force developed a vision of how the Iron Works site could link the old downtown and the North Side and attract new jobs and businesses that would earn the borough tax dollars.

As the real estate market heated up in the 1990s, rumors of likely redevelopment on the Iron Works site began to circulate. The Phoenix Property Group, a new owner in 1999, proposed a suburban-style corporate office park, a long-stay apartment complex and suburban-style townhouses on 120 acres. Borough leadership felt that the plan did not match their vision for downtown Phoenixville's rebirth, and tensions began to rise.

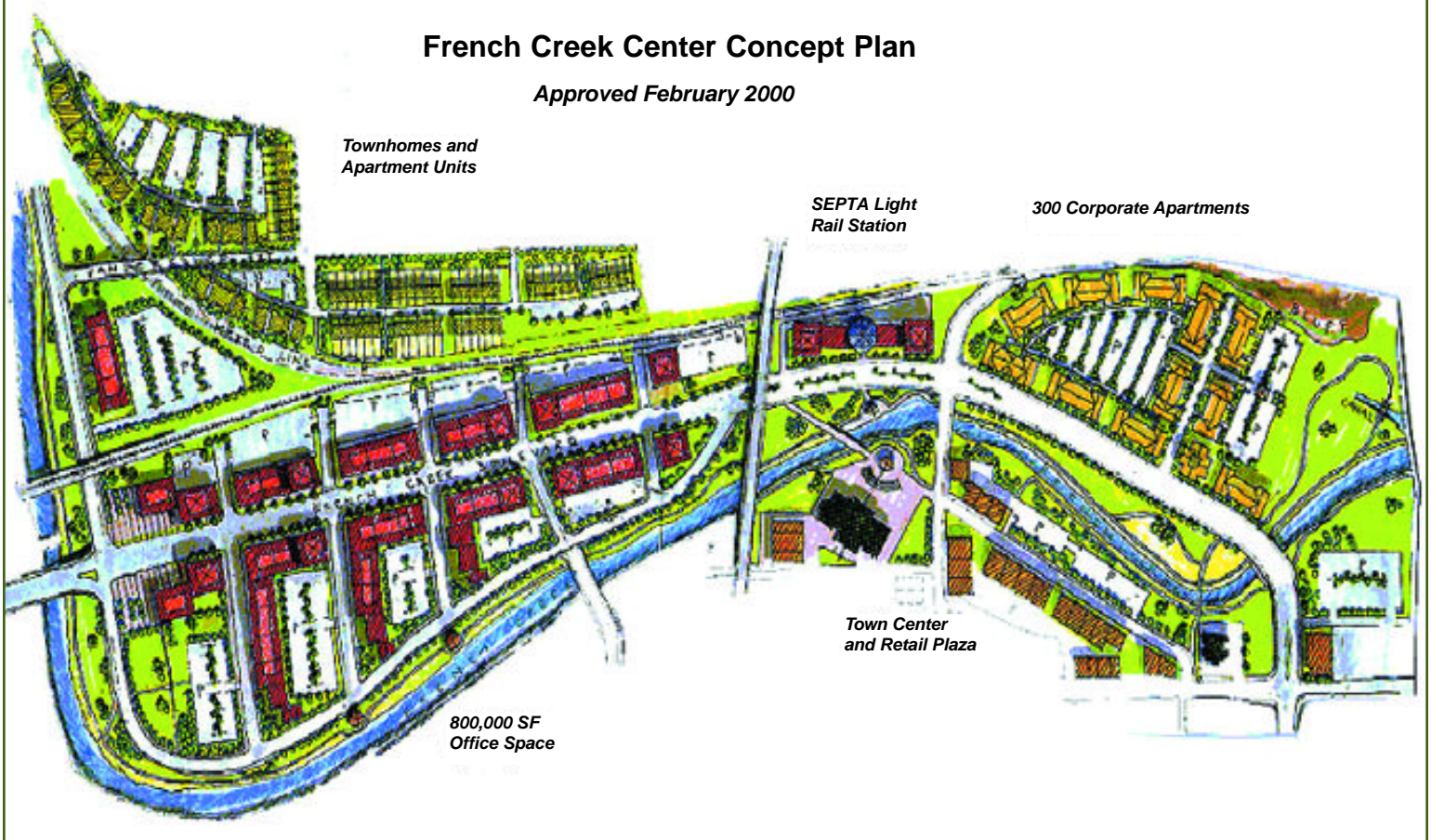
Late in 1999, the Chester County 2020 Trust, an organization that is committed to managing growth and sprawl in Chester County, brought Klaus Phillipson, a renowned town planner from Baltimore, to Chester County. Dave Davis, Executive Director of the Trust, arranged for Phillipson to meet with the developer and members of Phoenixville's Vision Partnership Task Force. Davis convinced the developer to hire Phillipson to revise the proposal to incorporate traditional town planning principles and to present the revised plan informally to borough officials and key stakeholders before seeking official approvals.

The January 2000 presentation was a great success, as borough officials saw their desires incorporated and concerns addressed. Central to the new plan was the integration of the development with an attractive transit station, the dedication of 39 acres of parkland along the French Creek, and careful connection to the downtown and newly restored Phoenix Iron Works Foundry Building.

At a special planning commission meeting, the developer proposed a unified development master plan and a zoning ordinance. This proposal illustrated the needed changes to the present ordinance that will allow the project to be realized. According to John Messina, the chair of Phoenixville's planning commission, "Throughout the planning process, we had public meetings, and the presentation of the master plan was televised, so the community has been very involved. All of the feedback I've received has been great. Everyone in the borough is excited about this long-overdue redevelopment, which has been in the works for the past 12 years." The borough will also seek support from government agencies to fund necessary infrastructure,

French Creek Center Concept Plan

Approved February 2000



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including transit, roads and parks, to enable the full realization of the plan.

While it appears that the development will proceed whether or not the SVM is built, the development design is transit-oriented and pedestrian-friendly. It is also truly multi-use in character, with 800,000 square feet of commercial space to provide roughly 5,000 new jobs, 500 units of corporate apartments and townhomes, and 50,000 square feet of retail space that may include live-work units on the upper floors. The proposed Metro station will be no more than a half-mile from all parts of the development.

Lest skeptics wonder about the economic prospects of such an ambitious and unusual infill development, research performed by Zimmerman & Volk Associates on behalf of the GreenSpace Alliance (a project of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council) and 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania predicted brisk sales of "New Urbanist"-style residential units at the site. (New Urbanist principles encourage mixed-use, compact, pedestrian-friendly development, including TOD.) "By providing a range of newly constructed housing alternatives, a traditional neighborhood development on the site will not only retain existing Phoenixville households but also attract new households that might otherwise have settled in greenfield locations," said Todd Zimmerman of Zimmerman & Volk. "Younger families will be the most common household type, but some empty-nesters and retirees will also be attracted to the new neighborhood." ■

Rail-Volution 2000: A Four-Day Conference on Building Livable Communities With Transit

Nestled within the Rocky Mountains, Denver, Colorado, is enjoying a boom. It's a city with a newly thriving downtown, a strong economy and easy access to the great outdoors. But with the arrival of new businesses and outdoor enthusiasts to the region has come the all-too-common problem of sprawling suburbs eating up open space and taxing already overcrowded highways.

Like many western cities, Denver has taken a serious look at the troubles its popularity has caused, and perhaps more than other cities of its kind, Denver has made great strides toward addressing these problems. For example, a successful new light rail line zips from city to suburbs, alleviating some of the heavy car traffic in the region, and close to 20 TOD and livable community projects have recently been completed or are in the works.

Denver's problems with sprawl and the measures it is taking to address them made it an ideal location for the Rail-Volution conference this past fall, an annual national livable communities/transit event that attracted about 1,200 attendees from the transit, urban planning, government and conservation fields. With a combination of lectures and workshops on transit- and livable communities related topics and field trips around the Denver area, conventioners got a taste of how sprawl and livability issues are being addressed in Colorado and across the country.

There are a number of successful new TOD projects in the Denver suburbs. One example is CityCenter Englewood, a complex along Denver's new light rail line in which new construction is being combined with a section of a former shopping center in a blue-collar community that has been on the decline. With its civic center and city hall, library and shops, CityCenter Englewood is creating a new community focus. When complete, the development will also contain a health club, apartments and homes to ensure that the area is active 24 hours a day.

Several projects are underway in Boulder, Colorado, which is about 25 miles northwest

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This mixed-use development at a light rail station in the Denver suburb of Englewood contains a library, civic center, government offices and an art gallery. The area to the left of the plaza will contain residences and retail, once the project is complete.

Rail Fever Sweeps the Country

Commuter and light rail development is catching on across the United States, as TODs spring up in city after city.

Whereas Rail-Volution 2000 celebrated the anti-sprawl efforts occurring in and around Denver, it also highlighted numerous transit and TOD projects across the country. Rail-Volution speakers described TOD projects such as Orenco Station in Portland, OR; mixed-use urban developments in Dallas and a TOD in the suburb of Richardson, TX; an urban village that will eventually have light rail in Pasadena, CA; and a redevelopment project in Hollywood, CA, that will include a theater, retail outlets and a hotel.

More than 75 cities across the country are in the process of trying to build or expand light rail systems, and TODs are underway along some of these transit lines. A few of these “new start” rail projects are close to home. In addition to the proposed Schuylkill Valley Metro in Southeastern Pennsylvania, there are new rail lines or improvements to existing transit systems in the works for Wilmington, DE; Newark, NJ; Harrisburg and Pittsburgh, PA; and New York City.

Southeastern Pennsylvania has been slow to join the TOD bandwagon. With its extensive commuter rail system and numerous brownfields and other infill opportunities, the region is ideal for this sort of development.

The proposed SVM project represents an opportunity for the region to expand its already wide-reaching transit system and to incorporate TOD. Perhaps Southeastern Pennsylvania will rediscover how transit can be the anchor for a new generation of the sort of walkable, vibrant communities that many have grown to love. ■

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The buildings of the Eighth and Pearl mixed-use development in Boulder, Colorado, echo the character of the surrounding neighborhood. Retail and office space occupy the front of the complex, attractive townhomes and hidden parking are attached and transit is nearby.

(Rail-Volution 2000, continued from page 4)

of downtown Denver. Boulder has already begun to address sprawl by creating a 30,000-acre greenbelt that surrounds the city and acts as a growth boundary. Two of Boulder’s projects, “Eighth and Pearl” and “Ninth and Pearl,” are small, mixed-use, infill developments. Both are steps from bus transit stops and Boulder’s Pearl Street pedestrian mall. The Eighth and Pearl project, completed in 1999, combines retail on the ground floor, office space on the second floor, a hidden parking garage and five residential townhomes with front porches and small gardens. One of the reasons this development has been successful is that its design and scale are compatible with those of the surrounding neighborhoods.

After a boom in the early 1980s, central Denver suffered during the recession that occurred later in that decade. However, the past ten years have seen the downtown become vibrant again. A free bus shuttles locals and tourists up and down the 16th Street pedestrian mall; bars, restaurants and galleries line the streets of the revitalized historic LoDo (Lower Downtown) district; and shoppers fill the stores of Larimer Square. Adjacent to LoDo, a mixed-use development called The Commons is under construction.

The Commons, with easy access to commuter and light rail, buses and the 16th Street shuttle, will include apartment buildings, warehouse lofts, brownstones and office and retail space.

While Denver may seem geographically and culturally distant from Southeastern Pennsylvania, many of its problems with sprawl and concerns about planning for future development are similar to problems and concerns here. The time has come for us to think about the direction in which we’re heading. We as a region can consciously plan what we want Southeastern Pennsylvania to look like, or continue to allow haphazard growth to swallow up the remaining countryside and take resources away from existing cities and towns. Change is inevitable — therefore, we must act now to ensure that the region evolves in a transit-friendly way. ■



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DVRPC is an interstate, inter-county and inter-city agency that provides continuing, comprehensive and coordinated planning for the orderly growth and development of the Delaware Valley region. It serves the southeastern Pennsylvania counties of Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia and the southern New Jersey counties of Burlington, Camden, Gloucester and Mercer.

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