

# Equitable Transit-Oriented Development That Benefits Fresno's Residents

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Thanks to the California High-Speed Rail project and its frequent, fast train service, by 2030, Fresno will be connected to other parts of the Central Valley—and eventually to the Bay Area and Los Angeles. This makes investing in a mixture of walkable and dense residential and commercial development—what urban planners call transit-oriented development (TOD)—in the downtown area appealing.<sup>1</sup> The city can then strategically leverage its resources, along with federal and state grants, to improve public infrastructure (e.g., streets, roads, stormwater, energy, etc.) and make downtown even more attractive for private investment, while improving quality of life. These public projects and private investments will play an important role in bringing new vitality to Fresno's downtown and reaffirming the city's importance in the region. Additionally, Fresno's Q bus rapid transit, which opened in 2018, provides frequent service on its almost 16-mile route, including a section through downtown. These bus stops could also generate substantial new development activity.

Over the past three decades, dozens of communities across the US have adopted TOD policies and plans as part of a broader strategy to revitalize their downtowns and commercial corridors. Recent evidence suggests, however, that without intentional anti-gentrification efforts, TODs—especially in walkable neighborhoods—can result in less housing affordability and even displacement (Duncan 2011; Padeiro, Louro, and da Costa 2019). Thus, a critical question is: How can Fresno ensure that development around its high-speed rail station and other transportation investments will maximize benefits and minimize harms for local residents and businesses? Equitable TOD is one strategy.

## WHAT IS EQUITABLE TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT?

Equitable TOD is designed to address some of the possible negative aspects of private investment that can flow from public transportation improvements. It is founded on the principle that people of all incomes and backgrounds should directly benefit from the convenience of living and working near quality rail and bus services—and that the communities near transit should be designed to meet a broad variety of local needs and desires.<sup>2</sup> Equitable TOD has the potential to concurrently create both placemaking and livability in the context of transportation and affordable housing.

Equitable TOD is different from standard TOD, because it acknowledges that development driven by only what the private real-estate market would produce could result in transit areas that only serve people with the means to afford new, market-rate buildings. It also acknowledges that keeping the cost of living near public transportation affordable would save all residents money, while reducing their carbon footprint and other negative environmental impacts from car dependence.

Several major elements of equitable TOD include the following:

- **Adjacency to a transit system** that provides affordable, frequent, and reliable service to other parts of the metropolitan area—thus offering essential access to employment, services, and other needs so that local residents can live without relying on an automobile.

- **Safe and well-designed infrastructure**, including accessible sidewalks and protected bike lanes as well as green spaces and other public spaces.
- **Anchor facilities** that fulfill important daily needs, such as libraries, community centers, grocery stores, day care centers, schools, and pharmacies.
- **Opportunities to create small businesses**, particularly by the full diversity of people living in the local community so that they can provide a mix of relevant products and services. These small businesses can be in both retail spaces and small-scale industrial or manufacturing facilities.
- **Various housing types at different price points.** Housing should be designed to serve families of all types, including people who are single, people who have physical or mental disabilities, people who need living assistance, and people who have previously suffered from chronic homelessness. Units should be designed to have a range of bedrooms and be affordable to everyone in the community at large.

Having the right mix of uses and activities for the building stock requires an integrated approach to planning and financing as well as interventions by different levels of government. To achieve equitable TOD outcomes, municipalities must develop collaborative, cross-agency, and cross-sector partnerships that span the nonprofit, public, and private spheres. Collectively, these actors are in an ideal position to make equitable policy, planning, and project decisions that can bring about the right blend of development in areas near transit. A critical element of equitable TOD is the involvement of community members in the planning processes and development decisions about each neighborhood.

### **WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF HOW EQUITABLE TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED ELSEWHERE?**

A good starting place for local governments is to adopt an equitable TOD plan or strategy that sets a strong foundation for guiding investments and development projects; the plan can apply to the entire city or to certain districts or corridors. Each local government can then adopt more specific ordinances and practices to facilitate implementation of the plan.

The city of Austin, Texas, recently completed an equitable TOD policy plan, with the goal of ensuring that the city’s new transit system, now under construction, would result in “new economic opportunities for residents of all income levels” (City of Austin 2023, 12). The plan specifies areas of the city where residents are facing potential risk of displacement and categorizes the city’s future transit stations in terms of what policy interventions are needed. The city will use the plan to identify potential interventions that support affordable housing and include people of color in the planning process.

Following the completion of its equitable TOD policy plan in 2020 (City of Chicago 2021), the Chicago City Council adopted a Connected Communities Ordinance in 2022.<sup>3</sup> The ordinance made several changes to the city’s zoning code, with the intention of producing more equitable neighborhoods around transit stations. The revised rules require new housing projects to incorporate more affordable units in high-income and gentrifying neighborhoods. They also limit the number of parking spaces required for new projects, with the goal of reducing the overall development costs of housing units.

### **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE OBSTACLES STANDING IN THE WAY OF EQUITABLE TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT?**

Equitable TOD is difficult to achieve in neighborhoods with little market demand for new development. Without such demand, it can be hard to attract investors to build new housing projects, let alone open grocery stores or other types of retail. This can threaten a city’s ability to create viable neighborhoods where people of all backgrounds want to live.

Moreover, to create communities around transit that are filled with essential public services, such as libraries and parks, local officials must often prioritize investing in those areas instead of in other parts of the city. This can be challenging for some elected officials who want to spread the resources around the entire community rather than in just the equitable TOD areas.

## FOR DISCUSSION: CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENCOURAGING EQUITABLE TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT IN FRESNO

- What lessons can Fresno learn from the development of the Monarch housing project in Chinatown?
- To what degree can public officials in Fresno work together across agencies to ensure that transit stations are surrounded by a variety of public and private development, from libraries, parks, and schools to vibrant commercial corridors and grocery stores?
- How can Fresno work to maximize investment in affordable housing around transit stations, even as it also encourages the construction and rehabilitation of market-rate housing in those areas?
- What role can or should placemaking projects for public spaces play in providing the community with benefits that correspond to Fresno’s diverse downtown culture?
- As city planners start the process of updating the downtown specific plan in early 2024, what policies, incentives, and requirements should they consider to foster equitable TOD principles and practices?
- How can exploratory scenario planning workshops and other strategies help identify community-driven development projects, including both residential and commercial investments?

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “What Is TOD?” Institute for Transportation & Development Policy, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://www.itdp.org/library/standards-and-guides/tod3-0/what-is-tod/>.
- <sup>2</sup> “What Is ETOD?” Center for Neighborhood Technology and the Metropolitan Planning Council, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://etod.cnt.org/about/>.
- <sup>3</sup> “Connected Communities Ordinance,” City of Chicago, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/equitable-transit-oriented-development/home/connected-communities-ordinance.html>.

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