Transit-Centered Development Grants – Moving TOD Forward

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owns, villages, and cities throughout New York and Connecticut are brimming with ideas to create thriving communities around bus and rail stations. One impediment to bringing these ideas to fruition is funding, which is why Tri-State Transportation Campaign (TSTC), with the support of the One Region Funders Group, created a transit-centered development (TCD) grant program in 2009. In the absence of a state sponsored transit-oriented development grant program, municipalities actively have been seeking funds that allow them to move their TOD plans forward. In its second cycle of grant giving this past May, TSTC awarded $145,000 in grants to four municipalities eager to advance affordable housing, walkable communities, and neighborhood revitalization around one of their greatest assets: transit.

The Village of Mamaroneck in Westchester County, New York, a 2012 TCD grant recipient, has been looking to maximize development around the Metro-North Railroad station in the Village for a long time. With over 2,500 average daily trips taken from its platforms, the Mamaroneck Train Station is one of the busiest on the New York section of the New Haven Line. While the Village has implemented successful affordable housing projects over the past 20 years, including construction of 215 affordable units since 1990, additional development is hampered by periodic flooding and outdated zoning. With its grant, the Village is collaborating with the Washingtonville Housing Alliance (WHA) to develop a TOD Zoning Study that will include an inventory of land around the train station, input from several community planning groups, and an analysis of existing zoning.

One of the strongest components of Mamaroneck’s proposal is its collaboration with WHA, which has an established and successful legacy of improving housing options for low and moderate income individuals living in the Village of Mamaroneck. Washingtonville, the area within a half-mile radius around the train station, is a low and moderate income area. More than half of its residents are Hispanic. Formed in 1980, WHA builds housing, provides resources to existing and new home buyers, and leverages fiscal resources for housing in this community.

Significant progress has been made since the grant was awarded in May. Over the summer, initial information was gathered from a meeting, walking tour, planning board conversations, and research that culminated in a preliminary study area and the appointment of a 15-member Steering Committee. The Committee members represent business, community, non-profits, elected officials, and Village staff. Public outreach regarding the study is underway. Materials have been distributed in both English and Spanish via social media, flyer distribution, and the Village’s website.

Visualization is integral to the zoning study, and the Village team worked with various mapping specialists to inventory the land uses throughout the study area. This thorough analysis was shared in a community visioning process in September, known as a charrette, where ideas, concerns, and challenges were shared by the community at-large. Two additional charrettes were held in October and November. The Village is steadily incorporating the feedback from these community meetings into its land use analysis, which is the blueprint for the draft transit-oriented development zoning ordinance. Draft TOD zoning amendments are expected early 2013. These will help guide the Village’s future development around the train station.

With two TCD grant cycles underway, some clear lessons are emerging. Modest investments go a long way towards transforming communities. With a total sum of $335,000 in grants, the TCD program has been the catalyst to move TOD from the conceptual to the actual in 11 communities, including Peekskill, Mount Vernon, the Town of Babylon (Long Island), Brookhaven (Long Island), Newark, and Trenton. Also, the most successful projects are rooted in broad community outreach/planning and have strong buy-in from local leadership. Lastly, state policies are lagging behind municipal innovation and demand. The interest in the Tri-State/One Region TCD program and the demand for funds has far outstripped available resources. This suggests that both New York and Connecticut can do more to support momentum at the local level. Doing so would translate into economic, health, environmental, and mobility benefits for both states.