



## **Technical Assistance for Sustainable Communities: Building Blocks**

### **Technical Assistance Tool: *Implementing TOD 101***

Greer, South Carolina May 15-16, 2012

**To:** Mike Sell, Assistant City Administrator, City of Greer

**From:** Dena Belzer, Strategic Economics

**Date:** August 9, 2012

**Re:** Suggested Next Steps as Outcome of Technical Assistance

### **1. Key Issues Addressed During the Workshop**

Greer is a city of about 25,000 people that straddles two counties and sits between the two largest cities in the upstate region, Greenville and Spartanburg. Although the entire region suffered considerable decline during the 1980s as the historic textile industry relocated offshore, through strong regional collaboration, the economy has rebounded and is now growing. While most people consider this growth as positive, there is also an emerging awareness that without taking some kind of action, the Upstate region will evolve to become more like its neighbors to the north, Charlotte, and to the south, Atlanta, while losing much of its own distinct character. One major symptom of this challenge is increasing traffic congestion. In 2009 when Greer updated its comprehensive plan, participants in that process identified transportation as a key issue related to future growth patterns. In addition, the region is now at risk of becoming a non-attainment area related to federal air quality standards due in part to increased traffic congestion. And, finally the South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) is considering widening Interstate Highway 85 between Spartanburg and Greenville which is extremely congested.

One solution to both future growth in traffic congestion and declining air quality is to consider creating a regional transit system. Right now, both Spartanburg and Greenville have relatively small bus systems that primarily serve the central part of each city and are targeted to low income “riders of necessity.” While the Greenville system does have some routes that extend east almost to Greer’s western boundary, right now, there is no single system serving the entire region and no bus service within Greer. Initial discussions about a regional transit system have envisioned a bus rapid transit (BRT) line running along Highway 29. On the surface, Highway 29 appears to offer the ideal route for such a bus line because: it offers a direct connection between downtown Greenville and downtown Spartanburg while also traversing Greer and several smaller communities. Also, many of the region’s major north/south arterials cross the Highway so people could easily access park and ride lots from either side of the highway; and, a BRT line could be a less expensive alternative to widening Interstate 85.



However, in discussing what factors contribute to a robust regional transit system that includes supportive land use policies, it became clear that further study would be required to determine what role

Highway 29 could play as a BRT corridor and if this route could serve as the region's first BRT line, or might be more appropriate as a future phase in a regional transit network. Some of the Highway 29 corridor's challenges include:

1. Other than the two major downtowns, most of the region's most significant employment concentrations are either along or closer to Interstate 85 or other significant arterial corridors, but are not necessarily proximate to Highway 29.
2. The existing development pattern along Highway 29 consists primarily of low density commercial uses with virtually no housing. While there are many strong neighborhoods located just to the north or the south of the Highway, there is no strong pedestrian connection from these neighborhoods to where future bus stops might be located. Therefore, creating a transit supportive land use pattern along the Highway, including higher density housing and/or commercial activities, would be very challenging. Even Greer's Comprehensive Plan, which is organized around the concept of strong centers, corridors, and communities, does not envision any new centers emerging along Highway 29.

Although further study will be required to determine whether Highway 29 is the right corridor for the region's first BRT line, this road is still an important arterial corridor and could be redesigned as a "complete street," i.e., as a road that serves cars, transit, bicycles and pedestrian equally well. One scenario would be to start extending the existing bus service that already runs on Highway 29 further east into Greer and completing segments or "demonstration projects" of complete street around the bus stops. This incremental approach could serve both a functional purpose by giving people more modal options for commuting into Greenville; and start to signal to the real estate development community that Greer is prepared to make the public investments necessary to support private investments in TOD projects. Assuming that these projects are successful, it will be easier to make the case for a more expansive BRT line.

Finally, building a regional transit system, even if Highway 29 is not the initial corridor should be a very high priority for the Upstate region because:

1. Designed correctly, a regional transit network could potentially help alleviate the future growth in traffic congestion currently threatening to undermine the region's quality of life.
2. A robust transit network could be a more cost effective way to serve the region's future mobility needs than continuing to build new roads, and perhaps even to expand Interstate 85.
3. A transit system could be critical to the region's continued economic expansion by helping to attract an educated and skilled workforce who have the choice to live in many places, but will want to locate somewhere offering many lifestyle options including mobility options beyond the car. A transit system could also help the region stay within the air quality attainment limits. If the region exceeds the air quality standards, this will directly impact of the cost of doing business in the Upstate region.
4. Transit can be an important system for serving families, especially those with senior citizens who should drive less and/or children too young to drive. Both groups need mobility, but are



often isolated or otherwise dependent on others to drive them places. In many regions, transit systems have offered a “lifeline” to both of these groups.

## **Targeted policies/ideas/strategies discussed during the workshops**

The Upstate region needs to enter into an immediate discussion about how to start planning for a regional transit network. This dialog must include not only the transit and transportation planners; but the jurisdictions responsible for land use, including the cities and counties; major employers; community based organizations such as local chambers of commerce and economic development corporations, Ten at the Top, Upstate Forever; major institutions including hospitals and colleges and universities; and citizens. Both educating these groups and doing the technical analysis necessary to design, finance, and build a regional transit system will take leadership and cooperation from all parts of the community.

### **General Strategies for undertaking this process could include:**

- Convene the key actors to begin a discussion about what a regional transit network could look like and how to begin the planning process
  - Organizations to be included in this initial dialog would include:
    - Cities of Greenville, Spartanburg, and Greer
    - GPATS and SPATS
    - Greenlink Transit and SPARTA
    - Ten at the Top
    - Upstate Forever
    - Major economic development corporations
- Look at how other regions have undertaken this process.
  - Maricopa Association of Governments in the Phoenix region is in the process of completing a “sustainable transportation study” that might serve as a role model for the Upstate region.
  - Other resources are available from the Federal Transit Administration and the Center for Transit Oriented Development.  
<http://www.fta.dot.gov/about/library.html>  
<http://www.ctod.org/>
- Link the discussion of a future transit network to future population and employment growth projections for the region so that people can understand how transit can help the region accommodate future growth without compromising quality of life. Portland, which has one of the best transit systems in the country, provides an excellent indicator of how a strong transit network can enhance quality of life. A study completed in 2007 for the organization CEOs for Cities found that within the Portland region the number of vehicle miles traveled annually peaked in 1996 and has declined ever since; and that as of 2005, Portland residents drive 20



percent fewer miles every day than the average person in the 33 largest regions in the country. The paper estimates that in 2005, by driving four fewer miles per day than the national average, Portland residents were able to save \$1.1 billion, or 1.5 percent of personal income<sup>1</sup>. A perhaps more interesting finding of this paper asserts that people with shorter commutes are also happier. Research shows that less time spent commuting alone and increased income both correlates to increased happiness. And, while in many ways Portland may seem like a very different kind of region than the Upstate, in many ways the two have much in common. Both regions suffered significant economic declines due to industry restricting, in Portland's case the restructure came from a decline in the forest products industry; but now both regions are experiences increases in their knowledge based workforce and are becoming more attractive to younger households, including young families.

- Plan for transit in a holistic context so that transit investments can leverage or help to optimize other public investments in the region.
  - In other regions, lack of coordination between public agency investments, such as economic development incentives for business locations, have worked at cross-purposes to transit investments.
  - <http://www.goodjobsfirst.org/sites/default/files/docs/pdf/bus.pdf>
- Develop a more “nuanced” way to talk about transit and transit oriented development in the Upstate region so that people have a better understanding of various terms and concepts
  - Rapid bus, high capacity transit, bus rapid transit, local bus
  - Circulators, streetcars
  - Transit oriented development (TOD) and transit supportive land use patterns
  - Be clear that not all transit corridors should be able to support future transit oriented development right on the corridor
  - Clearly define “nodes” or locations that can support future TOD
- Organize tours to take key decision makers to other regions so they can experience how a transit system works and what the process was to create that system
  - Charlotte, Denver, and Portland are regions that host many of these types of tours. Both Charlotte and Denver have had to build a strong political constituency to pass a regional sales tax measure to support their transit expansion. (for more information on the Charlotte line see <http://www.transportation-finance.org/projects/cats.aspx>, or contact Tina Votaw, [tvotaw@ci.charlotte.nc.us](mailto:tvotaw@ci.charlotte.nc.us)

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ceosforcities.org/files/PGD%20FINAL.pdf>



- Look for ways to engage other key stakeholders who will have an interest in supporting transit and TOD
  - Equity advocates and non-profits
  - Developers (Urban Land Institute can be a strong national partner)
  - “anchor institutions” such as hospitals and colleges/universities
  - Major employers
  - Elected officials at all levels of government
- Start a direct dialog with SCDOT over the role realistic transit could play in alleviating congestion on Interstate 85
  - Although SCDOT is looking at Highway 29 as part of its overall plan for addressing congestion on Interstate 85, however, in material presented by South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) at our TOD workshop held on May 16, 2012, the amount of investment intended for improvements on Highway 29 appeared relatively small, and the anticipated impact with respect to moving traffic off of Highway 85 also appeared small. More specific information on this issue will be available sometime soon from SCDOT (<http://www.scdot.org/inside/I-85/I85.aspx>). Therefore, by expanding the discussion to include a different regional transit option, there may be a more significant way to address congestion on Interstate 85

#### **Specific Strategies for Greer could include:**

- Keep “reaching out”
  - Through its comprehensive plan update process, Greer has already established a strong track record for engaging citizens implementing a community vision. The city should follow this model for facilitating a discussion about the potential for transit in the city.
  - Greer should continue to work with its regional partners to address the regional transit system issue. These partners include the metropolitan transportation organizations for Greenville and Spartanburg Counties, GPATS and SPATS; as well as with the key regional stakeholder organizations Upstate Forever and Ten at the Top.
- Define Greer’s short, medium, and long term goals for transit and TOD
  - Evaluate where specific local and regional transit links could serve Greer residents and employers by looking at employment and residential concentrations, studying commute patterns, and understanding how these patterns could potentially support a transit network
  - Look for ways to partner with GTA/Greenlink as an approach to creating transit service in Greer. There may be significant advantages to this over starting a new transit system in Greer.



- Look to create a complete street segment along Highway 29
  - A possible segment for this demonstration could be from Arlington Road to Highway 290. For more information on complete streets and an example from Charlotte, go to <http://www.completestreets.org/news/charlotte%E2%80%99s-complete-streets-policy-wins-national-award/>.
- Identify specific communities or centers within Greer that could evolve into transit oriented areas and begin improving pedestrian and bicycle amenities such as sidewalks and bike paths. Creating these places could allow Greer to have the first TOD in the region, even with limited transit
  - To the extent feasible, these places should also be encouraged to support new development that is at “transit supportive” densities and where there are some civic and/or commercial amenities such as schools, small neighborhood shopping district, a park, etc.
  - The downtown neighborhood could be a “pilot” project for this kind of activity.

## **Implementation and Coordination**

Greer should move forward to quickly engage its own resident and business community to begin defining Greer’s goals for transit. The City should also start working on at least one pilot project for a transit oriented neighborhood and begin to explore a more detailed process for defining and implementing this vision. Part of this process can also be dedicated to determining how to proceed with creating a “complete street” segment along Highway 29.

In addition, Greer should stay involved with ongoing regional discussions about creating a more comprehensive transit system that connects a greater number of residents to the region’s major employment centers, including but not limited to downtown Greenville and downtown Spartanburg. This work will likely require more research and information dissemination to both “make the case” for the system and develop the appropriate transit alignments and technologies.