

# Commonwealth Communities: Planning for the Future of Transit and TOD

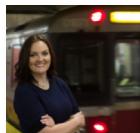
Virtual Symposium: November 3, 2021

## Speaker highlights: what has been the impact of COVID-19 on transportation?



**Jair Lynch, Jair  
Lynch Real  
Estate Partners**

"We need to think about places as a whole; how can we create places of opportunity? COVID showed that we need more of these places. Transit is not running the same and the infrastructure that was the backbone of traditional transit has been challenged. We need to determine where we can create jobs to create economic development to create opportunity. Mobility and accessibility connect people with these opportunities"



**Heather Hume,  
MBTA**

"When thinking about TOD and COVID, we need to focus on rider experience. COVID has given us a clear dataset about where riders need us most, and we can use this information as a conversation point for when we're making decisions."



**George  
Leventhal,  
Kaiser  
Permanente**

"Coming from a health and care perspective, commitment to equity and social justice needs to be the main concern of transit and TOD. If we are focused on the social determinants of health, one of which is housing, many of these are dependent on transit."

## Background

COVID-19 has dramatically altered our sense of community and place. Massachusetts communities faced unprecedented hardships, but met them with resilience, innovation, sacrifice, and strength. During the Fall and Winter of 2021, LOCUS, Smart Growth America's program to promote responsible real estate development and investment, hosted Commonwealth Communities: Smart Growth Strategies for Our Emergent Future. This series of five virtual symposia provided Massachusetts' elected officials and local government staff a platform to hear from experts across the country and discuss strategies for enhancing placemaking and equity in the Commonwealth to bring health, prosperity, and resilience to their communities over the long term. This five-part technical assistance series, summarized in these five discussion guides, addressed walkability, transit-oriented development, small businesses development, and zoning reform. The symposium series resulted in engaging conversation, opportunities for partnerships, and the development of new ideas in the realm of smart growth and sustainability.

In this session, speakers examined the intersection between transit-oriented development (TOD), gentrification, and displacement. They discussed disparities in TOD and innovations that can make transit more accessible to everyone. During the session, speakers focused on three case studies: Columbia Heights in Washington, DC, the construction of the Purple Line in suburban Maryland, near DC, and the transit system in Boston.

## Case study: Columbia Heights Metro Station, Washington, DC

Disparities among income groups that are prevalent in urban and suburban places correlate with disparities in access to TOD and transit. Although TOD and transit access can increase opportunities for residents in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods, often, TOD can lead to displacement of these same residents as new development occurs and property values rise. An example of this is the neighborhood of Columbia Heights in Washington, DC. **Prior to the opening of the Columbia Heights Metro Station, the neighborhood was a working class, diverse, and affordable to low and moderate-income households; but access to the Metro, as well as TOD investments in the area, attracted more affluent residents, displacing some long-time residents.**

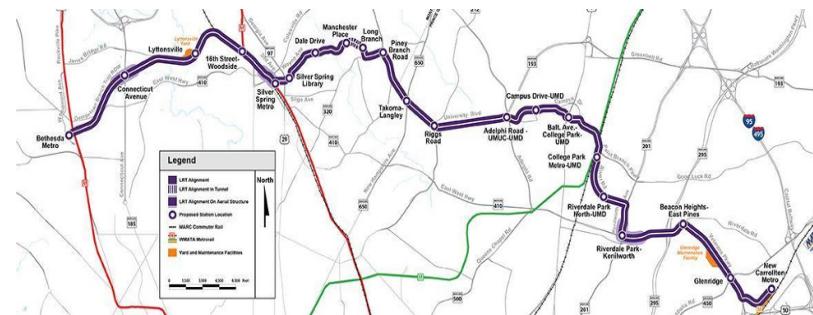
Today, however, [22 percent of housing units in the neighborhood](#) continue to be attainable by low-income residents, because of the concentration of subsidized housing in the neighborhood, and intentional strategies on the part of the city, like investments from the D.C. Housing Production Trust Fund (HPTF) through which the city dedicates \$100 million a year to preserve affordable housing and provides low-income residents with rental assistance. Without these intentional preservation efforts, it is likely that all of the housing would have been out of reach to low and moderate-income households.



*Renovated Tivoli Theatre at the center of Columbia Heights in Washington, DC. Source: George Leventhal, Kaiser Permanente*

## Case study: addressing income disparities with the construction of the Purple Line

The Purple Line, currently under construction in the Maryland suburbs just north of Washington, D.C. will, when completed, connect higher income areas in Montgomery County to less affluent areas in Prince George's County. Panelist George Leventhal explained that, in his view, the main goal of the Purple Line is to achieve social justice and equity by connecting these two areas with a significant wealth gap. The project has experienced major delays and has yet to be completed due, in part, to objections from residents in the more affluent neighborhoods to the west and on the part of CASA, an immigrant advocacy group, and others concerned about gentrification and displacement to the east. (continued...)



*Map showing the planned stops for the Purple Line Light Rail. Source: Maryland Transit Administration*



Current development at the future Bethesda Metro station in Montgomery County (left) and at the Capitol Heights Metro station in Prince George's County (right). Source: George Leventhal, Kaiser Permanente



To resolve these concerns, D.C. transit authority, WMATA, and local group reached a compromise to create a community development agreement, which ensures that affordable housing would be provided at stops along the line. The agreement also requires that the communities along the Purple Line have access to information about plans for TOD around the new station.

Although the construction of the Purple Line has not gone as planned, valuable lessons came out of the friction and negotiation:

- **Local governments need to plan for the long-term consequences of transit and TOD projects.** Displacement resulting from public infrastructure investments can take a long time to come to fruition as transit projects can take decades to complete. However, once the problem of displacement is recognized, it is often too late to make the investments in affordable housing and adopt the governance mechanisms which can support long-term residents and businesses, as well as others in need of affordable units. Notably, affordable housing development, intended to mitigate displacement, can also take many years and residents may have already been priced out by the time these units are available. These extended timelines must be taken into account when plans are made to address changes in the market that transit investments will inevitably bring about.
- **Governments must embed strategies to ensure that the voices of all affected community members are heard and their needs and desires considered equitably in the design and development of multi-year transit and infrastructure investments.** Community engagement strategies need to take residents' and businesses' availability and barriers to participation into account and meet these barriers through the design and timing of meetings and engagement formats. Community engagement should both be part of the initial planning for the project and continued throughout the project to ensure that compromises optimize solutions that benefit all who are affected by the project. Most of all, engagement needs to be matched with action and consideration of the needs and input of impacted communities.

## Case study: fare transformation in Massachusetts

Changes in ridership during the COVID-19 pandemic provided valuable data on when and where service is most needed. The fare transformation systems will improve rider experience with the "T", Boston's subway system, buses, and commuter lines. Lessons from changes in ridership during the pandemic include: 1) people will return to using transit, even if ridership was significantly reduced during the pandemic; 2) riders use public transit for a variety of reasons and it is essential that this service continues to improve and expand to meet that variety of needs.

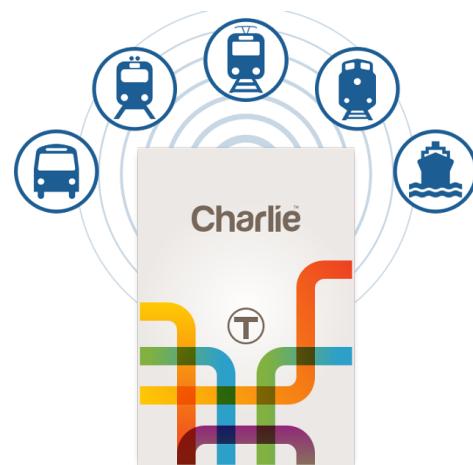


Source: Heather Hume, MBTA

As Heather Hume of the MBTA noted, Massachusetts residents have called, in recent years, for more efficient and integrated transit systems across the Boston Metro area. Currently, riders can only use certain cards on certain transit systems and transfer arrangements are unreliable. While this presents inconveniences for all riders, this unreliability presents significant barriers to those who rely on transit due to lack of car ownership. The MBTA's fare transformation initiative, to be completed by 2024, will make paying for transit easier and more convenient. When the project is finished, riders will be able to tap and board at any door on any mode of transportation with a fare card, smartphone, or contactless credit card and reload their cards using cash or credit cards at vending machines in every rail station and at some bus stops.

The fare transformation plan is part of a larger initiative to improve accessibility and rider experience along transit lines in the Boston Metro area. The MBTA took feedback from riders about their frustrations and the changes that could be made to improve their travel experiences. Some of the most notable concerns raised were:

- **A lack of communication with riders.** Daily riders felt unaware of planned changes to frequency of service, and planned interruptions such as construction. Proactive communication from the MBTA would decrease frustration and enable riders to plan travel to meet their needs.
- **The need to accommodate a wide range of riders.** The MBTA needs to understand the different characteristics and needs of their riders and find ways to accommodate everyone who uses the system, regardless of their income or destination.
- **A need for more specific data.** To understand all riders' needs and how they use the system, particularly because the ways that people use transit have changed significantly in the past two years, MBTA needs to collect better and more current data on their riders. Specific data on who uses transit and when can help disperse reduced fare cards, reduce transportation costs at the busiest time of the day, and provide more consistent fare collection on commuter rails going in and out of the city.
- **Inconvenience with boarding and transfers.** Riders want the MBTA to create one card for the entire transit system and make it tappable to ensure optimum convenience for all riders.



*Image depicts the CharlieCard, the main transit card for the Massachusetts metro area. By 2024, riders will be able to use the CharlieCard for all modes of transportation in the Massachusetts metro area. Source: Heather Hume, MBTA*

**“The way that we work and think about transit has changed, technology has changed, but the way we think about transportation has not.”**

**-Heather Hume, MBTA**

# Additional Resources:

- Case Studies- Transit-Oriented Development (TOD), (2022). The Commonwealth of Massachusetts. <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/case-studies-transit-oriented-development-tod>
- Ezike, R. How Transit Agencies Can Transition to Contactless Payment without Leaving Anyone Behind, (2020). The Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/how-transit-agencies-can-transition-contactless-payment-without-leaving-anyone-behind>
- Environmental Stewardship. Kaiser Permanente. <https://about.kaiserpermanente.org/community-health/improving-community-conditions/environmental-stewardship>
- How to make public transportation an attractive option in your city, (2021). C40 Knowledge. [https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/How-to-make-public-transport-an-attractive-option-in-your-city?language=en\\_US](https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/How-to-make-public-transport-an-attractive-option-in-your-city?language=en_US)
- Shayan, A. How Tap-To-Pay Transit Will Drive Further Contactless Adoption in the U.S., (2021). Forbes Finance Council. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesfinancecouncil/2021/03/18/how-tap-to-pay-transit-will-drive-further-contactless-adoption-in-the-us/?sh=2edef19b2965>
- Transportation for America. Smart Growth America. <https://t4america.org/>

**The Commonwealth Communities Symposium  
was made possible thanks in part to support from  
the Barr Foundation. The opinions expressed in  
this Discussion Guide are those of the Symposium  
participants and do not necessarily reflect the  
views of the Barr Foundation.**



**Barr  
Foundation**