

Housing in the Right Place at the Right Price—for Everyone



Transforming rhetoric into action—coupling zoning and land use reform with actionable, practical public policy is the key to advancing equity within housing developments near transit.

Everyone should be able to enjoy the benefits of transit-oriented development, including reduced travel time to work or other destinations, reduced reliance on cars, and access to other amenities, such as retail or cultural facilities. But for so long, low-income families and communities of color have been explicitly prohibited from accessing these amenities due to systemic racism in land use decisions and community development patterns.

Equitable TOD means creating and deploying intentional, pragmatic approaches to public policy that both make it easier to build attainable housing near transit and sustain affordability beyond the immediate development project. Unless there is an intentional effort to ensure that these projects deliver affordable housing and preserve affordability, the pattern of disenfranchisement will continue and low-income community members will not have the opportunity to share the positive outcomes of TOD.

Key discussion points

1 There is a fundamental difference between increasing housing supply near transit and building equitable housing in transit-oriented communities. The first approach continues the status quo while the second supports the prosperity of the project to flow to traditionally disenfranchised residents.

While increasing housing supply is one step in addressing market demand and potentially improving long-term affordability, it is not sufficient to advance equitable development outcomes.

2 Zoning in transit-serving areas is often the first systemic barrier to the creation of higher-density or more affordable housing. For example, a 2018 analysis of the greater Washington D.C. area by Dr. Tracy Hadden Loh found more than fifty percent of the region was zoned for single-family residential—a high percentage of which is within a half mile of transit.

3 While efforts to implement equitable zoning practices are beginning at the local and state level across the U.S., much progress remains to be made. Christian Dorsey, Vice-Chair of the Arlington County Board, said rhetoric that underscores equity in housing and transit-oriented development often does not translate into action or tangible policy. Conversations and dialogue that highlight the need for equity within land use and housing near transit are necessary, but not sufficient; action is needed. Communities can help preserve or expand opportunities for attainable housing near transit through pragmatic policies and programs, including:

- **Inclusionary zoning**, which mandates that new construction include a percentage of units affordable to low and moderate-income households;
- **Form-based codes**, which are land development regulations that foster predictable built results and a walkable public realm by using physical form; inherently expand housing options by allowing communities to build everything from single-family detached housing to high-rise apartment buildings with little to no bureaucratic red tape;
- **Tax abatements**, which reduce or eliminate property taxes for households within certain income thresholds in areas where real estate values have risen rapidly;
- **Community benefits agreements**, which are legally binding between developers and residents in which developers agree to deliver neighborhood-serving amenities or affordable units within a larger-scale project.

Equitable Transit-Oriented Developments ensure that investments in places benefit traditionally underserved people—in addition to investors, developers and market-rate occupants—and that these projects do not contribute to historic inequitable practices. Instead, ETOD projects create places where people of all abilities, ages, incomes, and backgrounds can enjoy and traverse their community, without relying on cars.



“We need to make it easier to build housing in the right place and harder to build housing in the wrong place.”

– **Cheryl Cort**, Policy Director,
Coalition for Smarter Growth



*“If you support TOD,
why isn't it there?”*

– **Angie Rodgers**, Deputy CAO -
Economic Development,
Prince George's County

Questions to ask



1

If your community has not taken bold action to eliminate the historic patterns of segregation that continue to harm American families, ask “why”?

2

What is your community's housing need and how can much of this need be addressed in sites near transit?

3

Will this project support affordable housing by investing in people by creating high-quality jobs, sustainable wealth-building opportunities, and safe and sound places to live?

4

Are there existing examples of policies, programs, or projects in your community that preserve affordable housing near transit and/or expand opportunities to build Black home ownership that can be used as a template for future initiatives?

What's Next?



Be a transparent and receptive advocate for your constituents. Entry-level to mid-career planners can uniquely apply and implement an equitable lens in the planning process due to their regular access to their community's land use documents. They can carefully review these documents (including zoning codes and comprehensive plans) to determine if these documents and the land use policies contribute to discrimination and/or serve as barriers to ETOD in their regions by continuing to advance inequitable land use strategies. After review, these planners can then advocate for an equitable lens and/or the revisions of these documents, policies, and programs.



Developers can be an effective part of the advancement for zoning reform and can make the business case to illustrate how zoning and land use policy change would eliminate barriers to developing mixed-income, mixed-use ETOD projects. These development projects can include units for households of varying income levels, and mixed-use including opportunities to support small businesses.



Community members/coalitions should make proactive efforts to uplift and amplify the voices of underserved residents, and design outreach to meet the needs of those residents. Activism can raise awareness about the need for affordable housing, including both new housing developments and the preservation of existing affordability. Building a coalition of resident support may include connecting different constituencies such as youth and faith-based groups as well as social justice and climate advocates.

Recommended reading



[Smart Growth America's “Commonwealth Communities: Zoning for Equity”](#) guide summarizes strategies to make zoning more equitable while addressing the discriminatory history of zoning and land use within the country.

[Greater Greater Washington's “Where the Washington region is zoned for single-family homes”](#) article analyzes and compares different counties and their prevalence of single-family zoning around transit stations in the Washington, DC metropolitan region.

[“Equipping Communities to Achieve Equitable Transit-Oriented Development”](#) uplifts three ETOD projects and discusses how the equity provisions within each development could be replicated in other communities.

[EPA's “Encouraging Transit Oriented Development: Case Studies that Work”](#) report highlights several national examples of transit-oriented development and best practices that promote equity within transit-oriented development projects.

