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Summary

When conceived, Portland-area government planners heralded the Steele Park neighborhood as a Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) showcase. However, research indicates that residents sparingly use light rail; thus, traffic congestion and air pollution haven't been significantly reduced. Other touted TOD benefits haven't materialized, and new problems have, yet planners continue to mandate and subsidize such projects.

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Steele Park: Another MAX fiasco

By Michael L. Barton, Ph.D. and John A. Charles

For the past decade Portland transit planners have promoted light rail as a means of attracting high-density, mixed-use development. Planners believe such projects, known as Transit-Oriented Development (TOD), will create neighborhoods of commuters and shoppers who use transit instead of automobiles for everyday activities, thereby reducing traffic and air pollution.

TOD has become so important to local planners that it is now the primary justification for expansion of Portland's light rail system. Rail advocates concede that light rail is not worth the cost if it is built only as a transit system; they see it as a means to densify neighborhoods. However, the benefits of TOD are mostly theoretical. Little is known about how transit-oriented projects actually perform in terms of transit use and any correlated reduction in auto dependency.

Now that Portland's rail system is 17 years old, we can begin to assess the viability of TOD by looking at specific high-density developments. One such project on Portland's west side is the Steele Park neighborhood.

Steele Park is a development of detached, single-family homes located near the Elmonica Station of light rail in Washington County, just north of the intersection of Baseline Road and 170th SW Avenue. Originally planned as a medium-density subdivision on a 9.1-acre parcel, the project's developers were persuaded by government planners to replace their 44-home plan with 74 small homes and 18 units of multi-family housing. This was to be Portland's first example of transit-oriented development featuring detached, single-family homes.

Cascade Policy Institute conducted an analysis of Steele Park in early 2002. The study shows Steele Park has only minimal transit use and has generally failed to live up to expectations. Specific problems include:

- The high-density development plan assumed only one car per unit because of the proximity to light rail. In reality, virtually every household has two cars and many have three or four cars.
- The development has narrow streets with limited legal parking, but residents largely ignore the rules, parking on sidewalks and corners and creating hazards

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for pedestrians and children. With little storage space available in the small units, residents use their garages for storage. In several visits Cascade researchers saw no car actually parked in a garage.

- The narrow streets and chronic parking problems create a fire hazard that has been consistently ignored by land-use planners. The Oregon Fire Chiefs Association wrote a letter to Metro in 1997 based partly on its concerns about conditions in Steele Park. The letter stated, “Planners are promoting and approving development that we may not be able to service.”
- As part of the inducement for the developers to change their proposal, Washington County offered a \$300,000 federal grant for the construction of a buffer wall around the project. It turned out the project was not eligible for the grant but through a series of money-laundering transfers a total of \$463,000 in public subsidies from other sources came to be spent on the wall. Unfortunately, the wall was so useless for noise reduction or privacy that residents launched a petition in 1997 asking the county to improve it.
- Residents don’t use public transit in any significant numbers. Cascade did a traffic survey one sunny April morning from 6:30 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. Of the 73 trips (pedestrian, bike, auto, etc.) that left the development 11 went to the adjacent light-rail station, but seven of these were people who drove the quarter-mile to park in the free Park-and-Ride lot. A total of 92 people left Steele Park in these 73 trips and only four of them walked to the light rail station.
- The 18 units of apartments that were planned for Steele Park were never built and the land parcel was sold to another developer. The lot remains a vacant patch of weeds.

The stated objectives for Steele Park are not being met. Most residents don’t use light rail regularly, and local roads receive more traffic from the development than they would have under the original medium-density design. Consequently it is impossible to argue that TOD has resulted in improved air quality or reduced congestion.

Though Metro and TriMet continue to promote TOD as part of the planned \$2 billion expansion of light rail into both Vancouver and Clackamas County, officials familiar with Steele Park are less enthused. Bill Avery, principle planner with the Washington County Department of Land Use & Transportation, called Steele Park a “long-range fiasco,” citing the look of the project, the high ratio of renters to owners, the dislike of the adjacent neighborhoods and opposition from the Fire Marshal.

Light rail was originally touted as a congestion relief strategy. When that didn’t work, the new mantra became transit-oriented development. Clearly that concept is failing as well. Transit planners should either come up with another justification for light rail, or pull the plug on the regional rail program.

Michael L. Barton, Ph.D., is an academic advisor and John A. Charles is the environmental policy director at Cascade Policy Institute, a Portland, Oregon think tank. For more information on this topic refer to the Cascade case study, The Mythical World of Transit-Oriented Development: Steele Park in Washington County, Oregon, available at www.cascadepolicy.org/pdf/env/I_125.pdf

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