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Coronavirus crisis threatens push for denser housing

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SILVER SPRING, Md. — Katie and Timothy Carney were searching for a larger home to accommodate their growing family. But equally important to them was finding a place within easy distance of Washington's Metro light rail line. They finally pounced when they saw a 2,500-square-foot colonial style house in a mixed-use development less than a mile from the nearest rail stop in Silver Spring, Maryland.

"He can leave his office downtown and be home in 50 minutes," Katie Carney said of her husband, who works as a journalist at The Washington Examiner. He can walk to the transit stop in less than 15 minutes.

That's music to the ears of planners and housing advocates trying to address the housing crisis ravaging cities like San Francisco and Seattle. But some developers worry that the coronavirus pandemic will stop the momentum as social distancing and telecommuting become the norm.

Transportation and denser housing have been the two focal points of urban residential development for the last decade, as cities try to combat a severe shortage of affordable housing. In areas where car commute times continue to climb, and freeways are at capacity, building denser communities along transit lines is seen as a panacea.

These projects, known as live-leave developments or more formally as transit-oriented developments, can be no-frills projects that focus on housing and getting people in and out fast. Or they can be more centered on amenities, meant to attract not only residents but commercial developers who find the density attractive for restaurants, coffee shops and boutiques. As an added benefit, developers can usually forgo expensive surface parking lots on prime real estate, as most residents use public transportation.

In California, legislation has been proposed to change zoning restrictions to make building transit-oriented developments near light rail lines easier. The bill was narrowly voted down in January because of concerns that it would strip local communities of too much control.

But the need for transit-oriented developments will not go away, even with the pandemic, said the bill's sponsor, state Sen. Scott Wiener, D-San Francisco.

"We need to take a deep breath and do the things we know will put an end to the pandemic," Wiener said, referring to the need for testing and a vaccine. But after the pandemic ends, California will still have a staggering homelessness problem of more 100,000 people that can be addressed only by building more housing, he said.

Transit-oriented development also carries economic weight. Developments at six stops along the Gold Line in Pasadena, California, have attracted 3,500 housing units and created 250,000 square feet of retail space — along with 603,000 square feet of office space, 421,000 square feet of hotel space and another 306,000 square feet for other commercial construction — according to a 2016 study by Beacon Economics, an independent research firm based in Los Angeles.

Those numbers are comparable to what has been seen in other markets, said Adam J. Fowler, research director of Beacon Economics. He agreed that the pandemic would not change the need for transit-oriented development.



ALYSSA SCHUKAR

Clarendon Park, a high-density development about three blocks from a Washington Metro station, on April 28, 2020. Transit-oriented developments were seen as a solution to severe housing shortages, but experts say developers need to rethink the design for a post-pandemic world. (Alyssa Schukar/The New York Times)

But Isaiah Madison, a board member of Livable California, a nonprofit group that promotes local control, thinks the pandemic will force legislation on transit-oriented development in new directions.

"The whole discussion about housing will change. A lot of the bills and laws the Legislature have been discussing will be looked at in a different lens," he said.

Most experts say the demand for transit-oriented development will still exist in some form after the crisis, but the pandemic will leave a legacy.

Developers should take heed of the long-term effects of the pandemic, said Dr. Richard J. Jackson, professor emeritus in the Department of Environmental Health Sciences at the Fielding School of Public Health at the University of California, Los Angeles, who has studied transit and development.

"I wouldn't make any big development decisions right now," said Jackson, a former officer in the Epidemic Intelligence Service at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The economic fallout is likely to last five years or more, he added, and people may still be wearing masks for several years. Developers will have to factor the pandemic, and other crises, into their plans.

"You have to plan out 100 years for building residences and creating buildings that are resilient and confront a multitude of hazards: terrorism, earthquakes, fires, climate change, energy shortages," Jackson said.

In the same way that better sanitation came after the Spanish flu 100 years ago, post-pandemic innovations for commercial developers will emerge, said Jennifer D. Roberts, an assistant professor of kinesiology at the University of Maryland School of Public Health who has studied human health as it relates to commuter rail proximity.

"This is an opportunity to think in new ways, but people will still want to live close to transit," she said.

The challenge for developers will be marrying density with safety, which will now require an interdisciplinary approach.

The era of a single architect designing buildings is over, Jackson said, and transit-oriented development will need to bring in the best minds from design, health and transit to come up with living spaces that are conducive to community but also the well-being of residents.

Developers are already starting to consider new design plans.

Transit-oriented developments "will be much, much more focused on public health," said John W. Hempelmann, a lawyer in Seattle and a former chairman of the Transit-Oriented Development Council of the Urban Land Institute.

Expect more open spaces, broader sidewalks, slimmer roads and promenades in the future, Hempelmann said. Consideration for social distancing, along with more robust preparation, will mitigate the effects of any future pandemics, he added.

Seattle has several transit-oriented developments under construction, including a 24,240-square-foot project in the University District, which will feature a mixed-use high-rise with more than 200 apartments a few blocks from a planned light rail stop.

"No one knew what TOD meant 15 years ago," Hempelmann said. "Now, it is an extraordinarily popular concept."

But the excitement around transit-oriented development could be tempered as Americans adapt to telecommuting, decreasing the need for some to live close to mass transit, said Bob Youngentob, chief executive of EYA, a developer based in Maryland that builds transit-oriented developments in the Washington area.

The desire for denser developments might diminish, he said, and his company may switch its focus to townhomes.

"The forced interaction of sharing doors and elevators has caused some anxiety," Youngentob said. "Townhomes, where you come in and out of your door, and you know you are the only one touching your door handle, provide some comfort."

Despite worries over the pandemic, Carney, the Silver Spring resident, said the pandemic had not made her regret her family's decision to locate near Washington's light rail line.

"The hope is that this is not permanent, and this is why it is still worth it," she said. "If it were permanent, it might change my thinking."