

Transit Villages

<http://www.transitvillages.org/transitvillages.html>

The Train is Coming!

This is what many communities are now getting ready for, and it is happening in a big way. Community after community across America are changing the way they build to incorporate a new train into the mix. After years of believing that more highways will solve their transportation problems, community planners are now looking to new train systems in combination with building dense, walkable towns to create more livable, sustainable communities.

As the daily traffic jams reach epic proportions across America, planners and developers are looking to combining dense New Urbanist neighborhoods with new train systems to create a better form of community – known as transit villages. According to Michael Bernick and Robert Cervero, authors of the recent book *Transit Villages In the 21st Century*, the transit village combines the disciplines of urban design, transportation, and market economics. As stated in their book, “It is partly about creating a built form that encourages people to ride transit more often. However, equally important, it embraces goals related to neighborhood cohesion, social diversity, conservation, public safety, and community revitalization.”

The transit village is a compact, mixed-use, walkable community, centered around the transit station that, by design, invites residents, workers, visitors, and shoppers to drive their cars less and ride mass transit more. Bernick and Cervero set forth certain criteria that should be followed when planning a transit village:

1. The transit village extends roughly a quarter mile from a transit station, a distance that can be covered in about 5 minutes by foot.
2. The centerpiece of the transit village is the transit station itself and the civic and public spaces that surround it.
3. The transit station is what connects village residents and workers to the rest of the region, providing convenient and ready access to downtown, major activity centers like a sports stadium, and other popular destinations.
4. The surrounding public spaces or open grounds serve the important function of being a community gathering spot, a site for special events, and a place for celebrations.

This is New Urbanism on a train line. It is a joining of these two separate (but related) revolutions taking place in America, (New Urbanism and new trains) and creates something much greater than the sum of the two. New Urbanism by itself is a great improvement over conventional suburban development, yet still requires most residents to drive to destinations outside the community for jobs and other trips. Train systems by themselves are far superior to automobiles, but if the destinations at both ends of the trip are not walkable and convenient, few will ride.

The combination of New Urbanism and new trains into transit villages not only creates places that are better suited for living a higher quality lifestyle, but they are also commanding higher real estate prices. Across America, properties that are within a 5 or 10 minute walk to a train stop are selling for 20-25 percent more than comparable properties further away. When these are also part of a New Urbanist community or historic urban center, they sell for even higher prices. This proves that people are willing to pay a lot more money just to avoid the misery of the daily traffic jam, and to live a higher quality lifestyle. This higher quality lifestyle is made possible by the fact that people can live their daily lives without always being in a car, or even better, by getting rid of their car completely. This not only saves the aggravation and time wasted driving, but also saves considerable money. It is estimated that the average person spends between \$6,000 and \$8,000 per year owning and operating a single car.

There are also health advantages to be gained from getting out of cars. These include reduced exposures to car exhausts, car accidents and injuries. Traveling by train can also be a lot less stressful. One of the main reasons why so many Americans are overweight is because they get very little exercise in their daily routines. Transit Villages offer the opportunity to walk and bike as part of each day's normal activities. With good design, safe and pleasant bike paths, and easy bike parking at the train stations, many people who live further than the 5-10 minute walk will also be encouraged to take the train with a short bike ride to the train station.

A key to the success of a transit village is creating a high-quality pedestrian environment by using good design and including pedestrian amenities. Buildings with shops should front the sidewalks, and contain businesses such as cafes, small grocery stores, and dry cleaners that are useful to the residents of the community. Weather protected benches, bike racks, and possibly even shower & change facilities should be located at the train station, and throughout the village. Another important ingredient for success is fast, easy connections between systems with little or no waiting or hassle.

Higher densities are important for the success of both transit villages and train systems, and when the density is oriented around trains, it actually benefits the surrounding towns. A number of municipalities have realized this and are taking the initiative to change the way their communities get built. Huntersville, N.C., placed a moratorium on development within a half-mile of a new train line to prevent poorly planned developments and give the consultants enough time to plan transit villages at the train stations.

Developers with vision are realizing that transit villages are what people want and where the real estate market is headed, and are planning accordingly. Nate Bowman, the developer of the new transit village Anchor Mill in North Carolina is happy to be creating a place where people can have a better, more relaxed lifestyle while having less of an impact on the environment. He stated that "smart developers are building new towns and rebuilding historic cities near existing or proposed rail lines, while conventional developers are still building next to the congested highways." Bowman, also the developer of Vermillion, a traditional neighborhood located directly adjacent to Anchor Mill, sees a slowdown in road building and a big increase in train building over the years to come. When asked how he thought developers could help get transit villages and new trains built, he said "by educating people to the benefits of this type of design, and in helping to get transit taxes passed to pay for the new trains."

Cities in San Mateo County, California started giving up to \$2,000 per bedroom to help encourage high-density housing to be built within walking distance of the BART and Caltrain train stations. Redwood City will receive nearly \$1.3 million for a 422-unit housing complex that is planned near the train, and meets funding requirements of more than 40 units per acre, and located within 1/3 of a mile of a train stop.

New Urbanism has proven to be the solution to sprawl, while new trains are quickly proving to be the solution to our transportation mess. When these two are combined, transit villages are the result. While municipalities across the country plan for transit villages, citizens and developers alike are rapidly embracing the concept as the solution to many of our current problems, and the ideal model for creating livable and sustainable communities.