

Institutional Response to Transit Oriented Development in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area: Understanding Local Differences through the Prism of Density, Diversity, and Design

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Project Objective

The primary objective of this study is to examine local initiatives and institutional responses to rail transit development, drawing on Los Angeles County's diverse institutional, political, and socio-economic landscape. In particular, the study examines what inferences can be drawn about local responses to the design and planning of TODs, their relative success, and future outlook.

Problem Statement

Whereas most studies measure TOD outcomes in terms of market responses, the supply side story seems underrepresented in literature. This project attempts to address such lacuna and asks this fundamental question: What are the institutional responses to transit development and what policies or policy combinations facilitate development around transit? What are the circumstances for such policy responses and how effective are they?

Research Methodology

The research methodology relies on both qualitative and quantitative analyses. The project scope includes all of the 22 incorporated cities and communities where at least one LA Metro station currently operates. The effects of local policies on station areas' TOD performance are measured through the prism of the 3-D (Density, Diversity, and Design) framework proposed by Cervero and Kockelman (1997), considered to be the three key antecedents for successful TOD. The qualitative analysis draws on in-depth structured interviews of senior planners from seven case study cities. Finally, the quantitative analysis examines variables related to policy landscapes encompassing 93 stations. Factor and Guttman scalogram analyses rank the likely application of various policy tools identified by Los Angeles Metro.

Results

The main findings and results are as follows:

1. **Plans & Policies Matter:** Local plans and policies -- General Plans, Specific Plans, Community Plans, land use and zoning, overlays, and combinations thereof -- are the underlying drivers for TOD. Such planning documents articulate community vision into goals, objectives, and performance criteria. The matrix of local policies creates the foundation for density, diversity, and design -- key performance criteria for TODs.

Citywide policies thus become instrumental in ensuring consistency, effectiveness in implementation, and flexibility in context-based planning.

2. **Sophistication Develops Over Time:** Municipalities become increasingly sophisticated regarding the implementation of policies aimed to facilitate TOD. Over time, municipalities start applying the full palette of TOD-supportive tools, policies, and best practices at their disposal. With more experience, and by learning from doing, their decision-making process becomes less ad hoc and more systematic. Furthermore, over time cities start experimenting and developing solutions to address problems and issues at the local level.
3. **The Policy Conundrum:** While lack of TOD-supportive policies hinder development, seemingly their mere presence is not sufficient to spur TOD either. There are plenty of examples in the Los Angeles metropolitan area where station areas have suffered due to benign neglect – lack of vision and community engagement, and poor implementation, invariably resulting in “no there there.” Yet in some instances, places with adequate set of TOD policies have also languished with sub-optimal outcomes.
4. **Intentionality & Predictability:** Guttman analysis provides a measure of intentionality and predictability of TOD policy application. Fewer Guttman errors correspond to a higher coefficient of reproducibility. The years of operation may be the most significant determinant of predictability (and potentially the level of intentionality) of station area planning policies. Fewer Guttman errors for higher density downtown locations and older stations correspond to a multi-faceted approach to TOD promotion.
5. **TOD – A Byproduct of Economic Strength & Market Demand:** The relative success or failure of TOD seemingly is the byproduct of a proactive city and market demand, coupled with community engagement. While public policies create an enabling environment, market demand provides signals on emerging opportunities in the marketplace. The apparent success of TOD in many communities, such as Pasadena, Santa Monica or Monrovia (see Fig. 1), is driven by factors above and beyond the prescriptive policy framework. Local urbanism and regional housing dynamics drive the demand for goods (housing) and services making transit-oriented, transit-adjacent, or transit-supportive development possible, reflecting the city’s overall economic strength.



Fig. 1: City of Santa Monica and City of Monrovia – Metro Stations & TOD Specific Plan Areas