

DEVELOPMENT

Greasing the wheels at transit stations

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With 150,000 people coming and going each day on trains and buses, the intersection of Broadway Avenue and Commercial Drive is Vancouver's busiest public transportation hub.

But this urban crossroads, where two commuter rail lines and an express bus line intersect on the city's east side, is serviced by little more than a few low-rise commercial buildings filled with fast-food outlets, banks and a drug store.

According to the latest trend in city planning, this vibrant hub should be exploding with “transit-oriented development” – tall buildings filled with shops, offices and apartments. The theory is that if you put dense development near transit, especially rail stations, you'll have people living, working, shopping and travelling at maximum efficiency.

That Commercial and Broadway isn't a model of transit-oriented development illuminates the tough track such ideas face in Canadian cities. Still, Toronto and Vancouver are working hard to encourage higher densities around new and future transit lines.

“Building mixed-used developments next to transit is the one area of development where we have common ground between the city, developers and the community,” says John Conicella, vice-president of development strategy at Wesgroup Properties. “But the challenge the three groups have is that change is always the most difficult thing.”

Wesgroup just built a four-storey health clinic at the Broadway and Commercial intersection. While it's the tallest building there, it's far shorter than what Mr. Conicella wanted to build. However, he said a denser development would have required a rezoning and another four to five years of waiting for approval – even though all sides thought density was a good idea.

This zoning mismatch is just one of the many barriers to dense development around transit stations. Transit lines in Vancouver are attracting more overall density, says city senior planner Chris DeMarco, but it's uneven – and even irrational. Development sometimes blossoms in quiet, almost suburban areas and limps along at the high-volume traffic hubs.

In Vancouver, while the Broadway and Commercial section has stagnated, other stations in more suburban areas have experienced population growth rates of 50 to 100 per cent. In New Westminster, for instance, a small municipality east of Vancouver on the Fraser River, large projects are being planned around two stations.

This counterintuitive pattern carries over to Toronto, where subway stations along the wildly busy and decaying Bloor-Danforth line are mostly surrounded by sleepy neighbourhoods or, at most, low-rise buildings with motley corner stores and perhaps a shawarma shop.

Travel north to the suburbs on the Yonge-University-Spadina line, however, and you find the once-suburban

main street near North York station has transformed into a canyon of towers with 20,000 apartments and 12,000 employees in the vicinity.

Why the difference? Developers blame the city and development-resistant residents.

City planners agree. That's why Vancouver pushed to make dense development easier along the newly built Canada Line rail link, with buildings of four to eight stories permitted between stations, and up to 12 stories at stations.

“If there isn't clarity around what's allowed, developers are quite properly holding off because they don't know how much to pay for land,” says Brent Toderian, director of planning for Vancouver.

Toronto has gone one step further, says Rod McPhail, director of transportation planning. For the planned Eglinton line, his department intends to rezone areas around all 20 stations to higher densities, so that developers won't have to go through a public hearing.

But both Mr. McPhail and Mr. Toderian say other factors often intervene.

“Fractured [land] ownership is our biggest problem around the stations,” says Mr. McPhail. “In Toronto, we have lots of stations with no development around [them] partly because of that.”

That's partly the issue around Broadway and Commercial, Mr. Toderian says. Other problems there include a grocery store owner uninterested in developing and a scattering of lots too small to build anything large on.

But rezoning in advance doesn't necessarily help, says Mr. Conicella, whose company is putting up a large combined office/retail/condo complex at the Sapperton light-rail station in New Westminister. A particular rezoning might not fit with the kind of development a company wants to build, he says. A city's flexibility and commitment during a rezoning is more important.

He also points out that transit-oriented development is most successful in areas under transformation. Developments planned for former industrial land worked for neighbours who were happier to see condos than factories, whereas those planned for homogeneous, single-family neighbourhoods often run into opposition.

The vice-president of real estate for Vancouver's regional transportation authority, TransLink, says that factor – the likelihood of neighbourhood resistance – is shaping the agency's planning for future lines.

“It's very difficult, if not impossible, to rezone in single family areas,” says Phil Christie. “With the Expo line, the areas they put it through, they're still single-family homes 25 years later.

“What we can influence more is the future and the new lines,” he said, “making sure they're in the right spot where density can occur.”