

Communities By Design, a
nonprofit 501c(3) training and education
organization, in cooperation with the
City of Redwood City,
is pleased to present:

The Forum *at Redwood City*

A CONTINUING CONVERSATION ON CITY DESIGN

THE NEW TRANSIT TOWN: Best Practices in Transit-Oriented Development

FORUM #3
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2004
LITTLE FOX THEATER
2209 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:30 P.M.

On February 4, 2004 the City of Redwood City and the not-for-profit organization “Communities by Design” held the third installment in an ongoing series of discussion forums. The presentation featured **Shelley Poticha**, Executive Director of Reconnecting America’s Center for Transit-Oriented Development (TOD), a TOD advocacy, research, and policy group.

Transit-oriented development is an approach to planning that advocates concentrating housing and retail units in areas surrounding transit hubs. The TOD model has broad appeal in the planning and policy community for its potential to increase transit ridership and transform otherwise struggling neighborhoods into bustling urban centers. Despite these benefits, the number of TODs remains surprisingly small. Ms. Poticha’s discussion forum focused on why there are so few TODs and what can be done to spur development that is centered around transit.

There are several challenges, Ms. Poticha explained, to the creation of TODs. In addition to regulatory and political hurdles, there is no common definition for what a transit-oriented development is – TOD can mean different things to different people. As a result, TODs have become a “monolithic” concept upon which people cannot come to agreement. Also, there is a lack of TODs because of what Ms. Poticha described as a “tension between (transit) node and place”. In other words, because many transit stations are not sensitive to their surroundings, it can be difficult to get people to buy in to the concept of TODs.

Despite these challenges, there is a growing market for TODs. The changing demographics of metropolitan areas, namely aging baby boomers and new immigrants, have helped to fuel demand for urban, mixed-use housing with easy access to transit. Ms. Poticha also

emphasized how an increasing number of ethnically diverse families – for whom transit is often a way of life – will help to strengthen the market for TODs.

Ms. Poticha identified several other political and social trends that portend well for TODs. Cities across the country are investing large sums of money in transit and infrastructure; \$60 billion is allocated over the next fifteen years. Coupled with this transit boom is a comparable investment in our nation's urban centers. People are beginning to rediscover downtowns (which are often transit-oriented), creating what Ms. Poticha called an "Urban Renaissance". Finally, the real estate industry is beginning to recognize that there is a market for TODs and is responding to this demand.

In order to harness the momentum from these trends, Ms. Poticha stressed the importance of creating a performance-based definition of TODs. Ms. Poticha underscored the need for quantifiable methods for evaluating the success of TODs so investors can see that they are a financially sound venture that quickly recapture their value.

Creating successful TODs, according to Ms. Poticha, is determined by how well one works with four distinct stakeholders or "audiences": transit agencies, investors, developers and communities. Proponents of transit-oriented development should approach each one of these four groups with a distinct, tailored message. Transit agencies need to be educated about the ways that TODs can improve ridership. Investors need to be shown that TODs can be a market performer and increase real estate values. It is important to teach developers about the importance of making TODs affordable so as to avoid pricing residents out of the market. Community members must be encouraged to be vocal about what they envision for their neighborhood. By working with, and sending targeted messages to each of these audiences, TODs have a much better chance of becoming a viable alternative to traditional development.

Ms. Poticha concluded her presentation with a TOD case study from Arlington County, Virginia. In this success story, Arlington County encouraged development in areas surrounding Metro rail commuter stations. What emerged was a flourishing, mixed-use community that was less dependent on the automobile. According to Ms. Poticha, twelve percent of the people who live in the transit-oriented developments of Arlington County do not own a car.

During the question and answer session that followed Ms. Poticha's presentation, an audience member asked how people should promote TODs; given our country's love affair with the car, transit-oriented development is not always appealing to the public. Ms. Poticha responded by saying that the planning community should not think of the TOD concept as one that is geared towards taking on the entire car culture or automobile industry – that approach can often feel defeatist. Instead, Ms. Poticha recommended that TOD proponents approach this debate from a smaller, local context so they can more clearly see the success of their efforts. Ms. Poticha advised members of the public in the audience to find ways to involve themselves in local planning processes by lobbying for mass transit solutions that met their needs. By stressing their interest in TODs, the public can pressure policy makers and private developers to embrace transit-oriented development more quickly.