

OPINION PIECE

Transit Oriented Development

Population growth is a hot topic. In any given week you can pick up a newspaper and find some daunting prediction relating to the size of our cities in the not to distant future or a set of statistics revealing how under-equipped we will be to handle this growth in terms of urban planning, infrastructure and social support.

The world is faced with issues in regard to water, energy and climate change. We are rapidly urbanising and in that process we are desperately seeking greater environmental sustainability from our new and existing urban areas and built form. Furthermore, we read that cities throughout the world are grappling the need to build healthy sustainable and safe communities.

But how often do we read of solutions to these problems? Of big ideas or big people working to address these issues? I believe that the facts regarding population growth are proven and undeniable and so we need to be focusing less on the problem and more on solutions that will allow us to address them.

I recently travelled to Europe and the USA with a delegation from the South Australian Government which included the Minister for Transport and the Minister for Planning who share a focus on urban development considerations. The objective of the mission was to review transportation options and in particular transit orientated development ie mixed use development that is focused around transport nodes. The experience of this trip combined with previous study on this concept has convinced me that such development style could be the key to Perth's future development if we are to create a sustainable, liveable city for 3.5 million people by mid century.

Transit oriented development (TOD) is not a new trend in urban design, but the rate at which it is being adopted by Governments, planners and developers across the world is a recent phenomenon. TOD is a "back to the future" approach to planning cities. It basically means focussing higher density development around transit (typically train or light rail) stations, much as we did in the past before we became car dependent cities.

It refers to all types of development – housing, offices, shops, restaurants and entertainment and generally promotes development patterns which provide for denser development close to the transit station, usually within an 800m radius. The aim of the game is to develop places where the live/work/play environments are all in close proximity and therefore decreases reliance on cars. It creates the opportunity to walk to the shops or to work and offers a range of housing options that meet the needs of people in all life stages and with all levels of income so there is a long term investment in community by those who live there.

TOD is the complete opposite to the suburban sprawl that characterises much of Perth's metropolitan area where families often need more than one car to cope with even the basic movements of getting from home to work, from work to the shops, from the shops to home.

That is not to say that the Perth hasn't attempted any TOD. You only need to look at the success of the development at Subi Centro and more recent attempts at Midland and Armadale to see higher intensity of development in close proximity to transport developments which have proven to be incredibly popular with citizens in search of an easier and more sustainable lifestyle. But while these projects have been a success, it is notable that they have all been built around existing train stations as opposed to developing a transport network system to suit this style of development.

Development of new public transit networks such as light rail would create the opportunities for the Perth of the future. According to the Western Australian Planning Commission, 47% of our population growth is to be accommodated in the 'collar city communities' ie those suburbs that surround the city. It is my view that public transport and attendant TOD developments is one way to preserve the amenity of these existing areas.

It will create opportunities for increased densities without simply exacerbating our traffic problems and it will provide housing choices in locations which are desirable. People may choose to live in smaller houses, town houses or apartments with access to shops, work and public transport rather than simply living in smaller houses out in the suburbs, or bigger houses crammed onto ever shrinking blocks.

The advantages offered by such development go beyond the benefits of a simpler lifestyle – there are considerable positive outcomes in relation to the environment and sustainability. The increased residential densities around transit nodes and the emphasis on mixed land use to provide local employment opportunities work to reduce dependence on cars and offer residents lower greenhouse gas emissions and a reduction in the percentage of household income needed for travel.

Increased residential density also provides the opportunity for greater housing mix and choice. In turn, this diversity in housing allows people to remain within the same location at different family life cycle stages which promotes a greater personal investment into a community and creates a large social benefit.

I have visited well-planned, vibrant and exciting TODs and have seen how they can successfully create communities, ease congestion and relieve already overworked public transport systems. I have seen an alternative to the suburban sprawl that can turn a residential neighbourhood into destination that attracts people: a place built for pedestrians and bicycles, with great landscaping, wide footpaths and streets that are easy to cross; with plenty of shelter from sun and rain; with good signage, attractive seating, street furniture and good lighting.

Rosslyn-Ballston is an area in Arlington, Virginia, a commuter suburb of Washington, DC, that features a series of such developments. It is a nationally recognised model of TOD and smart growth principles and features a corridor of intensive development that provides for greater residential and employment densities around five new rail stations.

Planning and implementation of transit orientated developments does not, and should not, happen overnight and Perth may not need them immediately. I believe therefore that we need to be

initiating community conversation and education on this topic now to facilitate understanding, engagement and buy in when the development eventually happens.

Mayor Zimmerman of the Rosslyn-Ballston area advised me that achieving their development was 'an easy political sell as my forefathers did the hard work in explaining the facts and options to our community'.

I believe WE have that same responsibility.

Bill Hames is an architect and urban design professional and Chairs the Committee for Perth's Reshaping Working Group.