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TODs – Delivering Smarter Centres To South East Queensland

Creating a more compact urban form, with increased population density around transport nodes and activity centres is critical to the Queensland Government's South East Queensland (SEQ) Regional Plan. Transit Oriented Developments (TODs) are integral to accommodating the projected growth of one million people in SEQ by 2026. They will also enable the delivery of more viable public transport services.

On 5 and 6 March 2007, the Office of Urban Management (OUM) conducted a two-day conference entitled *Living Smarter: The Future for South East Queensland*, at the Surfers Paradise Marriott Resort. It aimed to assist industry practitioners deliver best practice urban planning and design.

It was well attended by a range of planners from the private sector and government. One of the major themes was TODs and how to ensure they are designed to deliver functional, vibrant mixed-use centres.

The keynote speaker was Gordon Price, Director of the City Program at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada and until 2002 a long-serving City Councillor.

The Greater Vancouver Region had a 2006 population of 2.18 million, with an average increase of 27,400 persons per annum over the past decade. This region is unusual in the North American context because it has no freeway system. Its outward expansion is significantly constrained by farmland, mountains and waterways and it has been widely recognised for its "smart growth".

Gordon Price highlighted the fact that after 20 years of pursuing smart growth policies focused on investment in elevated rail rapid transit, downtown Vancouver now has 40,000 people

living in mixed-use neighbourhoods with no-one more than three blocks from a transit route.



*South Waterfront in Portland, Oregon, which has adopted 'Vancouver Style' apartments with podium townhouses and retail to go with its new Aerial Tram
(Photo: courtesy Gordon Price)*

The City of Vancouver has also used social bonus zoning to reward developers with additional density in return for investment in the public realm (parks, social housing, public arts and recreation facilities). The majority of residents in this downtown area are lower to middle income renters, who "can afford higher than average rents, because their transportation costs are commensurately lower".

Good design is one factor that Gordon Price nominated as essential for the successful creation of TODs – he cited details like the 25 metre separation of high rise buildings to provide privacy and view corridors. It is critical that TODs have underground parking, so that the public transport station can have direct proximity to adjoining communities. This promotes the mixed-use pedestrian friendly environment that planners are seeking to achieve.

Podiums are another essential element of ‘Vancouver Style – high rises with a soft edge’, with townhouses and retail uses providing active street frontages and casual surveillance of public open space that enhances pedestrian safety.

The outcome for Vancouver, according to Gordon Price, is reduced commute times and fewer cars being bought. Another lesson has been that Vancouver TODs attracted more families with children than planners expected, with the need for open space suited to differing age groups.

Governance & Affordability

Mark Hedges, Director of Place Creation/Place Development at the East Perth Redevelopment Authority (EPRA) in Western Australia, spoke about the strategies employed to create successful urban renewal projects such as Subiaco and East Perth. He identified a number of levers, including encouragement of the creative city, great architecture, governance issues and infrastructure.

EPRA enforces detailed design guidelines on developers and actively discourages speculation in its centres by repurchasing sites if development does not proceed to schedule. It promotes inclusion of 10% to 15% of

social housing in its centres through linking additional density to provision of affordable housing units.

In discussing affordability, several speakers emphasised that talking only about affordable housing was taking too narrow an approach: the cost of transport and commuters’ time from the urban fringe should also be considered in the measurement of “affordable living”.

Reduced Car Dependence

Reduced car dependence is one of the objectives of TODs, but achieving this relies upon understanding of two fundamental characteristics of well-planned TODs. Firstly the public transport service, be it rail transit or bus, needs to be frequent and reliable and have sufficient capacity, with the station central to the TOD.

Barry Gyte of Queensland’s TransLink said, “Only when door-to-door trip time is better than driving, will people shift mode”.

Secondly, TODs should be planned as a network of activity centres linked by transit.

Robert Cervero of the University of California, Berkeley spoke of a network of TODs in a Transit Oriented Corridor within a Transit Oriented Region. He referred to Copenhagen in Denmark and Stockholm in Sweden with their bi-directional travel flows between centres that offer a balance of jobs, housing and retail services along their corridors.

With density reducing away from the public transport hub, the achievement of SEQ’s population growth increases should not necessarily mean introduction of medium to high density development throughout the suburbs.



*Surfers Paradise was praised for its engagement with its natural assets
(Photo: courtesy Tom Anthony)*

According to Robert Cervero, well-designed TODs can result in reduced vehicle kilometres travelled per capita per annum, citing examples such as Curitiba in Brazil, Zurich in Switzerland and San Francisco in California. Demand for parking can also be 15% to 30% less in TODs.

However he warned planners that such behavioural changes take time – it could take five to fifteen years for the community benefits of smart growth policies to be fully appreciated. Among the supportive public policies he mentioned were the following: shared parking, dedicated bus ways, car free Sundays and fare integration.

On a more encouraging note, Robert Cervero also pointed to land value premiums of 30% to 40% along Transit Oriented Corridors.

High Quality Public Realm

Critical to the public acceptance of higher density in mixed-use TODs is the creation of a high quality public realm. Professor Rob Adams, Director of Design and Culture at the City of Melbourne emphasised the use of public art, creation of small parks that

people can freely use and linking open space throughout the centre.

He pointed to Federation Square in Melbourne as an example of the public realm reclaiming the former marshalling yards, linking the city with the Yarra River and paying tribute to the lanes and arcades that are so characteristic of the city's nineteenth century subdivision pattern.

A Critique of SEQ Activity Centres

Formerly at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), conference presenter, Professor Gordon Holden, Head of the School of Architecture at the Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand, provided a critique of fifteen existing activity centres in South East Queensland, including institutional centres such as the universities.

Here on the Gold Coast, Surfers Paradise was praised for its linkages with its natural assets, the beach and the Nerang River. This contrasts with Brisbane City where the freeway system currently separates the city from the Brisbane River.

Older retail centres such as Indooroopilly and Chermside in Brisbane were criticised for their “Big Box” appearance and failure to engage with surrounding communities.

Both Robina Town Centre on the Gold Coast and SEQ’s newest centre, Springfield Town Centre in Ipswich City were criticised for the distance between key elements and the railway station. The regional shopping centre at Robina is 900 metres from the railway station, while the proposed Health City at Springfield will be 1.2 kilometres from the proposed railway station.

South Bank in Brisbane, with its rich variety of uses and strong physical and visual links with the Brisbane River was praised. The compact QUT was identified as one of the densest campuses, attracting 20,000 people per day, mainly as pedestrians using public transport. Its linkages with surrounding amenities have been enhanced by the completion of the Goodwill pedestrian bridge.

The QUT and Department of Housing’s Kelvin Grove Urban Village is an example of an inner city urban renewal project that has created a mix of uses including university buildings, office uses, retail uses and artists’ spaces. It is integrated with its surrounding community and includes both social housing and market housing.

In the future Queenslanders can expect to see examples of TODs created:

- At the transit station at the Gold Coast campus of Griffith University, which has already been linked by a new pedestrian

bridge across Smith Street to the site of the proposed new Gold Coast Hospital;

- At Milton in Brisbane, the FKP Property Group is developing a mixed-use project over the railway station, to include 200 apartments, a 127-room hotel, 13,500 m² of office space and 3,000 m² of retail space; and
- With the extension of the Gold Coast Railway to Varsity Lakes, Delfin Lend Leases’ successful mixed-use development will also have a public transport station, albeit away from the main Varsity Parade precinct.

Delegates to the OUM Conference identified some of the challenges that SEQ planners face in implementing the smart growth policies advocated by speakers. In particular, concern was expressed about community acceptance of higher density and the need to integrate provision of infrastructure such as railway services with the creation of TODs. It is understood that the latter issue is being addressed in the current annual review of the *SEQ Infrastructure Plan and Program*.

Further information on international best practice in designing TODs may be sourced from the New Zealand Ministry for the Environment’s publication *The Value of Urban Design*, June 2005 – www.mfe.govt.nz See also Gordon Price’s excellent online newsletter, *Price Tags*, available at www.pricetags.ca and at www.sightline.org The OUM has also released a DVD of the Conference, Phone 1800 021 818.

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