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FALL 2011

Platform

President's Corner

By John Robert Smith
President and CEO

Welcome to the Fall Platform newsletter. As I write this, Congress has just returned after its recess with a mountain of issues awaiting action.

Policy Director Sarah Kline takes a look at what's at stake while Chief of Staff Allison Brooks and Deputy Policy Director Darnell Chadwick Grisby explore the America Fast Forward proposal.

In a follow up to a summer newsletter article, Project Director Abigail Thorne-Lyman explains how to set up regional partnerships to support creation of sustainable, equitable communities, and Sam Zimbabwe, CTOD's director, details our work with regional stakeholders to articulate the benefits and challenges of transit and TOD.

We hope you find this newsletter informative.

'Making the Case' for Transit and TOD

By Sam Zimbabwe
Director, CTOD

Reconnecting America, often in collaboration with our partners at the Center for Transit-Oriented Development (CTOD), has been working with regional stakeholders to articulate the benefits and challenges of transit and transit-oriented development (TOD) in regions around the country. This year, we have completed regional reports in Indianapolis, Pittsburgh, and the Baton Rouge/New Orleans area. Each region has its own specific opportunities and challenges.

Indianapolis is deciding how to make initial investments in high-capacity transit, addressing issues from alignment to transit technology. Our work, completed in partnership with Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and Living Cities' Project on Municipal Innovation, highlighted the opportunities to connect regional employment concentrations, plan for station development and identify needed public investments. CTOD is continuing the work in the region by assisting with developing a strategic plan for TOD and a set of station area typologies.

Pittsburgh has an extensive transit network of light rail, bus rapid transit, on-street bus, and even several funicular railways traversing the hillsides. Our work has concentrated on helping to identify the benefits and opportunities for development around this transit network, and making the case for continued investment in both operations and expansion of transit.

Pittsburgh has an aging population, and our report highlighted ways that transit access can help reduce isolation of seniors while supporting the region's ability to attract and retain a young, educated workforce.

In Pittsburgh, we've been working with the Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group and the GoBurgh coalition – composed of nonprofit policy,

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Congress' Big Challenges

By Sarah A. Kline
Policy Director

After narrowly avoiding a global economic meltdown by raising the U.S. debt limit at the beginning of August, Congress returned to a packed agenda in September. Since most legislation – particularly that involving the expenditure of federal dollars – was on hold until the debt limit deal was reached, Congress must spend the fall dealing with appropriations as well as several major expiring authorizations, including surface transportation. But will Congress complete action on these important measures, or simply push off dealing with them until a later date? The latter is more likely.

For example, consider the fact that as of this writing, out of the 12 appropriations bills that Congress must pass in order to keep the government functioning after September 30, not a single one has become law. Even in a less divided Congress there would hardly be enough time between the end of the August recess and the end of the fiscal year for Congress to give full consideration to the wide range of programs involved in the appropriations process. This task appears nearly impossible in the 112th Congress, which has been characterized by deep ideological divisions. As a result, it is likely that, like last year, Congress will rely on a series of "continuing resolutions" to keep the federal government limping along after September 30 at flat or reduced funding levels.

Surface transportation authorization is on the same track. Since the current surface transportation bill, SAFETEA-LU, expired on Sept. 30, 2009, Congress has kept the federal highway and transit programs running through a series of short-term extensions, with the latest version extending the programs through March 2012. Much of the delay in completing a full reauthorization has been due to funding issues – the Highway Trust Fund, which provides the funding for these programs, is not taking in sufficient gas tax revenues to support current funding levels. How to fill the gap between what is coming in and what is needed to address our nation's crumbling infrastructure is an issue that has created a fundamental divide between the House and the Senate that will be hard to bridge. House leadership wants to cut highway and transit funding to match whatever the Highway Trust Fund takes in – projected to be more than a 30 percent cut over the next six years. On the other hand, Senate leadership would prefer to keep the same funding levels, and they are looking for a revenue source to bolster the Highway Trust Fund so that cuts will not be necessary.

If the Senate is able to find a revenue source with bipartisan support, it is possible that a two-year surface transportation reauthorization – at current funding levels – could move forward in that chamber. But would such a measure pass the House? The answer is not clear. Some House members would resist handing a victory to the Democrat-led Senate and to President Obama, who has highlighted transportation as a job-creator. But others would be hard-pressed to vote against a job-creating bill that does not increase the deficit (since it would be paid for from the Highway Trust Fund).

The authorization and appropriations debates are being conducted in the shadow of a debate that is more far-reaching than either one: the work of the Deficit Reduction Committee. This group of six senators and six representatives, evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, is charged with finding $1.5 trillion in savings for the federal budget over the next 10 years. The Deficit Reduction Committee is required by law to vote on a package of recommendations by November 23, and, if a majority of Committee members vote in favor, the full House and Senate must vote on the recommendations, without amendment, by December 23. If the recommendations do not pass both chambers, a package of $1.2 trillion in cuts will go into effect, dramatically reducing a variety of federal programs, including defense spending and various entitlement programs.

The Deficit Reduction Committee's work has the potential to significantly reshape federal programs of all types, impacting millions of Americans in hundreds of different ways. With the Deficit Reduction Committee's work as a backdrop for the transportation reauthorization and appropriations discussions this fall, it is little wonder that Congress seems to be turning to these matters with less than full enthusiasm. While the rest of the country wants action, Congress appears to be heading toward another round of stop-gap funding bills that will provide flat – or reduced – funding, which will only kick the can for major transportation policy reform further down the road.

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technical, and advocacy organizations, neighborhood groups and community development corporations, public agencies, and philanthropic organizations – and look forward to continuing to work with this coalition in developing a comprehensive regional action plan for TOD.

Baton Rouge and New Orleans are figuring out how to improve connections between the two cities and serve the parishes in between as job and housing patterns have shifted in the post-Katrina era. Working with the CONNECT Coalition, an alliance of business, community, and philanthropic stakeholders, we have been identifying the benefits of regional investment in transit, as well as some of the key next steps in making this investment successful. In this context, local transit connections to the intercity rail line, as well as continuing to focus regional housing and employment patterns on transit-rich areas will be important in maximizing the success of the rail line. Recognizing the financial constraints public agencies face and the important role of the private sector in implementing sustainable community development, our work highlighted the economic benefits that transit and TOD can bring to businesses, governments and local communities.

"Making the case" for transit and TOD in each of these regions has required different types of analysis and arguments based on the context and coalition partners. But there are some commonalities:

- A broad coalition of stakeholders working to invest in transit and make the most of this investment with the understanding that no one interest group could "go it alone".
- A recognition that the economic future of the region is intertwined with the ability to help people save on transportation costs, create attractive, walkable communities that retain a talented workforce, and connect these communities via high quality and reliable transit.
- And a desire to identify the public policies and investments that will speed implementation of transit and transit-oriented communities.

The coalitions we have worked with in these three regions have parallels in regions across the country, some of which we have also worked with in the past. We look forward to bringing the analytic approaches and understanding we've developed in these three recent efforts to other communities, large and small, across the country.

LA Vision; US Promise

Implications of the America Fast Forward Proposal

Photo by Francis Reilly / Creative Commons

By Allison Brooks
Chief of Staff
and Darnell Chadwick Grisby
Deputy Policy Director

Long known as a land of sprawl and disconnected communities, Los Angeles has emerged as a leader in transit investments, providing forward-thinking leadership for how infrastructure finance can and should continue, even in difficult financial times.

The vision laid out by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and other civic leaders includes light rail linked to an expansive bus network connecting the cultural homes of the African-American, Latino, and Asian-American communities; a "subway to the sea" that runs through a heavily congested but jobs rich corridor, and a beautiful intermodal transit hub in a reinvigorated downtown. When Mayor Villaraigosa asked the federal government to loan the region money to accelerate this vision—making it happen in ten years instead of thirty—it captured the imagination of national policymakers and community stakeholders alike and began a conversation about how the federal government can support local innovation and help accelerate private and public investment in infrastructure without breaking the bank. This story began with a simple local tax measure.

In 2008, Los Angeles County voters approved Measure R, a half-cent sales tax, and did so with a two-thirds majority. The measure pays for 30 years of transportation improvements connecting people to each other and to economic opportunity throughout the county. Knowing that the county would generate these resources over time, but antsy to accelerate the pace of investment so that community benefits could be achieved sooner, the mayor has advocated for the federal government to provide a series of loans to be paid back using those sales tax receipts. As a result, what would have taken 30 years to complete, could potentially only take 10 years. The idea has gained national currency as a mechanism through which the federal government can work in partnership with local governments and the private sector to improve regional mobility, get people back to work, and build healthier and more equitable communities. This vision has been coined "America Fast Forward".

This proposal has generated a tremendous amount of excitement among a diversity of stakeholders in Los Angeles County, including business, community based groups, housing and commercial developers, labor unions, philanthropy, and environmental stewards, among others. People from all walks of life recognize that this accelerated transit investment will have a huge impact on the communities along existing and new transit corridors. In particular, many folks want to take proactive measures to ensure that the low-income and moderate income people currently living along these transit corridors will stand to benefit from this investment, and not get displaced because the communities they have lived in for years and years have suddenly become more desirable and better connected to the regional economy.

This latter challenge begs the question: With transit construction on an accelerated path, how can "America Fast Forward" also fosters the acceleration of community benefits—such as affordable housing development and preservation, provision of childcare centers, grocery, finance, and health services, and other community amenities near transit– so that all people are on the proverbial train, and not left in its tracks? After all, as data shows year to year, it is low and moderate-income people who use public transit the most. Having access to quality public transit offers people the ability to save money on transportation and spend it on other things.

Some structural challenges make aligning the pace of transit investment with the pace of community development a complicated but not impossible endeavor. These include:

- Transit investments are made at the regional scale, often across jurisdictions, while most housing and community development investments are made at the project or neighborhood scale making it more challenging to align planning processes.
- Because transit agencies and city and county planning, housing and economic development staffs report to different agencies and are focused on meeting different performance expectations, there is not a lot of incentive for transit agencies and city and county departments to work together on community development activities around transit nodes.
- There is no dedicated source of station area planning dollars in the region, state, or at the federal scale. Moreover, such planning is a low priority with transit agencies who perceive that such planning efforts will slow down their timeline and potentially increase their costs.
- It is difficult to generate the resources to get out ahead of transit planning and construction to set aside land for the purposes of affordable housing or other amenities that will ensure needed transit ridership down the line.
  Not doing these things now could result in prohibitively high land costs in the future.

While it most often falls on local jurisdictions to take on station area planning and land acquisition, this can be a deep burden for cities struggling to cover their basic daily public safety costs. Moreover, with a growing number of regions passing similar sales taxes and anticipating that the federal government will accelerate transit expansion, it makes more sense to set national standards for how regions will make the most of these critical investments and provide the incentives for them to do so. Some of this can happen through enhancements to existing federal loan programs such as the Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (TIFIA), and by getting federal agencies on the same page in terms of defining the kinds of community outcomes expected from federal investments. But ultimately, this needs to occur at the local level through better coordination of transit agencies with city and county departments, including streets, planning, housing and economic development and with the individuals and families who are ultimately the most impacted by the outcomes of these investments.

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CTOD Update

The Center for Transit-Oriented Development (CTOD) continues to be engaged on multiple topics, from research to technical assistance to sharing of best practices in policy and implementation. Over the past few months we've continued our applied work in regions across the country, a new national publication, and several research projects that will bear fruit over the fall and winter.

At the beginning of August, we released a new publication in our "TOD 200" series, focused on regional planning for TOD. "TOD 204: Planning for TOD at the Regional Scale" highlights the approaches and coalitions that have successfully advanced regional TOD planning across the country. The booklet identifies eight key strategies, and includes case studies from a number of regions. We are at work on the next two booklets in the series, one focused on planning for "family-friendly" TOD, and the second on how investments in high-speed and intercity rail can foster TOD. The TOD 204, as well as the rest of the booklets in the series can be found at www.ctod.org.

In addition to these best practices resources, CTOD has been engaged in efforts across the country, including:

- Working with the Metropolitan Transportation Commission in the San Francisco Bay Area to rethink their groundbreaking TOD Policy, adopted in 2005 with CTOD support. This work includes trying to address transit-accessible employment access as well as housing.
- In the Twin Cities, working in collaboration with ULI Minnesota, Hennepin County, and the jurisdictions along the planned Southwest LRT Corridor to develop a corridor-level approach to TOD in coordination with ongoing transit planning. We're also working with a range of stakeholders, led by the Twin Cities office of LISC, to develop a comprehensive affordable housing action plan for the Central Corridor as construction has begun on the LRT line.
- A comprehensive upgrade to the National TOD Database (toddata.cnt.org) incorporating the 2005-2009 American Community Survey, an expanded set of stations including recent TIGER grant recipients and potential High Speed Rail station locations, and other additional datasets, which should be publicly available in November or December of this year.
- Initiating our comprehensive webinar series on TOD issues (see more information elsewhere in this newsletter)

We're looking forward to an exciting fall of new products and resources to help communities planning for transit and TOD. In the next few months we're working on:

- Several projects in Los Angeles, including corridor planning on the Orange Line BRT corridor and work with Metro on creating a new Sustainability Framework;
- A national analysis of TOD trends since 2000, including who is living and working near transit, and how communities around transit are changing,
- Regional technical assistance projects in the San Francisco Bay Area, the Twin Cities and Denver, with ongoing conversations in many other places, and
- Other updates and new resources on TOD.

Making Collaborative Partnerships Work

By Abigail Thorne-Lyman
Project Director

The last edition of Platform discussed the growing emergence of formal partnerships between multiple jurisdictions, non-profit groups and philanthropy to promote equitable, sustainable development. Long-standing collaborative partnerships focused on growth management - such as Envision Utah and the Treasure Valley Partnership in Boise, ID - have been more recently joined by efforts focused specifically on maximizing the community and economic benefits of transit investments without displacing vulnerable communities. Growth management, community development, economic development, housing, transportation, energy and infrastructure are all fields that require unique expertise, and that have thus been necessarily divided. But it is increasingly evident that no jurisdiction, discipline, organization, or funding source will singlehandedly achieve regional sustainability.

The partnership between the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Department of Transportation (DOT), and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has provided national leadership in creating multidisciplinary partnerships. HUD's Office of Sustainable Communities' Community Challenge and Regional Planning grantees throughout the country have mirrored this partnership with multijurisdictional collaborations of their own. But as any of these grantees will tell you, collaboration sounds good on paper but is surprisingly difficult and time consuming to accomplish in reality. Fortunately, we can learn from the successes and failures of longstanding collaborative efforts. Below is a sampling of lessons learned for those embarking on new partnerships around the country.

Lay out a collective vision, challenges to be addressed, and opportunities to be leveraged

A partnership is coming together to do something that no one participating organization can do alone. Since each partner will view shared issues from a different perspective, there may be disagreements on particular details of a given policy or approach. Keep focused on the ultimate outcome and looking beyond differences to the challenges that can be collectively addressed.

Some examples of vision, challenge, and opportunity statements can be found here:

- The Challenge of Great Communities http://ractod.org/oJJzNF
- About Envision Utah http://ractod.org/o8g4WJ
- Funders Collaborative http://ractod.org/nuWb5B
- Central Maryland Transportation Alliance http://ractod.org/qTwgmu

Work towards specific activities and priorities

Part of the reason the nation has experienced an uptick in the number of regional partnerships focused on sustainability is the growth of transit investments around which partners can specifically coalesce. A partnership that is coming together only because it "seems like a good idea" is not going to last. Establishing a set of concrete activities that make sense

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for the collaboration, and capitalizes on the respective expertise and skill set each partner brings to the table, will help ensure success. But don't try to take on too much at once; start with a strategic plan that identifies key short-, mid- and long-term activities and possible funding sources for these activities. These specific activities might include:

- Honing in on 3 to 4 station areas to collectively advocate for greater inclusion of density, innovative transportation investments, and/or affordable housing.
- Pushing for greater investment in sustainability programs by the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), local city, or transit agency.
- Identifying communities along a planned transit line whose residents or businesses could be vulnerable to transit construction or operation, and helping these communities with stabilization efforts.

Once key partnership activities are identified, it may be prudent to revisit who is included in the partnership, and whether other groups should be invited to effectively engage in activities.

"Making the Case" can be a solid first activity to pursue

What is it that motivates partners to come to the table? What is it that could motivate others to support the partnership? Create a fact-driven document that articulates how investments in transit, sustainability, and affordable housing could help address the core issues facing your region.

These issues may be different from region to region. Housing affordability, economic competitiveness, air quality, natural resource preservation, and planning for major demographic change are all issues that have motivated different regions to support sustainable planning and investments in transit and growth management. By laying out the data that supports the partnership's vision, policymakers will have an easier time substantiating their sustainable choices as well.

Figure out how your partnership will be governed

Each existing partnership around the country has a different structure for allocating funding, making decisions, and staffing. Before implementing the priority activities, it will be important to establish a structure that works for the partnership.

Consider financial opportunities and constraints, and individual time commitments given the set of activities to be pursued. If there is funding going to the partnership as an entity, who will be the fiscal agent and how will decisions be made about its allocation? How many groups will be involved and will some groups be more core to decision-making than others?

Once the partnership is up and running with one decision-making structure, establish a time to revisit how things operate to make sure the model is working. It may be that one organization takes the lead in fiscal management, staffing, and decision-making early on, but considers their leadership role to be temporary until other entities are ready to take on greater involvement. Existing partnerships have changed their governance models from time to time to adapt to changing conditions.

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