President’s Corner

BY JOHN ROBERT SMITH
PRESIDENT AND CEO
Nothing better illustrates the breadth and reach of the issues Reconnecting America is involved in than the topics discussed in this issue of our newsletter. And as I look forward to our continuing work, I welcome Chris Yake, Reconnecting America’s new project director. Chris’ background in transit-oriented development will be of great benefit to our team as we continue to fulfill our mission of transforming promising ideas into thriving communities.

Yake, who comes to us from Portland Metro’s TOD program, has worked across the country on TOD at all scales, from long-range regional visioning to station area planning and down to on-the-ground transit and development projects.

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TOD Series Adds Families Into The Mix

BY ELIZABETH WAMPLER
PROGRAM ASSOCIATE

Through collaboration with the Center for Cities & Schools' (CC&S), CTOD will soon publish an educational and action-oriented guidebook for integrating families and schools into planning for transit-oriented development.

The report, TOD 205: Families and Transit-Oriented Development, is the seventh in the series of FTA-sponsored reports explaining the best practices of transit-oriented development.

Successful, equitable TOD districts should include not only households with a diversity of incomes but also a diversity of types.

Families with children represent one important type of household that can accrue many benefits from living near transit. However, recent TOD projects have often catered to young professionals, empty nesters or other households without children. These have been seen as the strongest market segments for transit-oriented housing.

This trend is changing as communities around the country recognize the need to accommodate a wider variety of households near transit.

Families with children are an especially important market segment to attract to transit-oriented neighborhoods. Not only can they receive many benefits from living near transit, but the amenities that can attract families to transit-oriented neighborhoods can make these places more attractive for all people and help make our regions more competitive.

These family-friendly elements are captured by the definition of a “complete community”: a place with high quality educational options, access to quality housing and jobs, parks and recreation, retail and grocery stores, health care, and transportation options.

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By Sarah A. Kline  
Policy Director

While many people (including this writer!) predicted that 2012 would be a sleepy year for legislation due to the presidential election, the first several months have instead been chock-full of transportation-related activity. Both the House and Senate are actively considering multi-year surface transportation reauthorization bills. (As a reminder, the previous authorization, SAFETEA-LU, expired 2½ years ago and federal transportation programs are continuing to function thanks to a series of short-term extension bills, the most recent of which expires at the end of March).

Reconnecting America has been working with key Congressional offices and partner organizations to promote transit-oriented development in the context of the surface transportation reauthorization bill. This outreach has had an effect. Both the Senate and the House bills include new provisions specifically related to TOD. Separate Senate bills have also been introduced on TOD and livable communities.

The Senate is moving forward a bipartisan, two-year reauthorization bill that funds transportation at current levels, plus a small increase for inflation. Although current gas tax receipts into the federal Highway Trust Fund are not enough by themselves to sustain that level of funding, about $10 billion in receipts from various other taxes and fees would be transferred into the Trust Fund to cover the gap. The Senate bill focuses on improving the condition of the nation’s transportation infrastructure and consolidates a number of highway programs, and several transit programs, into a more streamlined structure.

The Senate bill also contains three important provisions related to TOD:

Pilot Program for Transit-Oriented Development Planning. The bill provides $20 million for each of FY2012 and FY2013 for a competitive grant program to support TOD planning around New Starts projects. Under this new program, FTA would award grants to public agencies to conduct planning around a new fixed guideway project or a core capacity improvement project. The planning activities would seek to enhance economic development and ridership on the project, improve access and connectivity, and enable mixed-use development and private-sector participation.

Transit-Oriented Development as a National Goal. The bill includes, for the first time, a set of national goals for the federal transit program. One of the goals identified for the program is to maximize economic development opportunities by connecting workers to jobs, encouraging “mixed-use, transit-oriented development,” and leveraging private investment and joint development. These national goals establish the framework under which the federal transit program operates and provide direction for the Federal Transit Administration in their implementation of the program.

National Technical Assistance Center for Transit-Oriented Development. The bill restructures Federal Transit Administration’s varied research programs into two targeted programs. One would focus on research, development, demonstration, and deployment projects, and the other would focus on technical assistance projects. Under the technical...
assistance section, FTA is given the authority to establish technical assistance centers in four specific categories, one of which is TOD. The centers would be established through a competitive process, on a biannual basis. The bill provides $4.5 million for each of FY2012 and FY2013 for technical assistance and standards development activities.

Unlike the Senate, the House has been moving forward on a reauthorization bill without Democratic support. Last month, the House proposed a five-year bill that would have deposited all gas tax revenues into the Highway Account of the Highway Trust Fund, rather than sharing those revenues with transit as has been done since 1982. Transit would instead have to be funded from general funds. However, due to an outcry from both Democrats and moderate Republicans, House leaders are now revamping their bill, and reportedly restoring transit’s gas tax funding. Reports suggest that the House will now move forward with a two- or three-year bill, at or below current funding levels.

Even if the transit funding issue is resolved, the House bill faces several challenges due to controversial policy proposals, including streamlining environmental reviews, increasing private-sector participation in transportation programs, and consolidating or eliminating federal programs. But the House bill also includes an important provision specifically related to TOD. Within the existing TIFIA program, which provides loans and loan guarantees for large-scale transportation projects, the House bill creates a new eligibility for projects that improve mobility within transit, passenger rail and intercity bus station areas. To be eligible, such projects must have a total cost of at least $15 million (other TIFIA projects must cost at least $50 million), and would be subject to the same financial terms as other TIFIA projects.

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**Victory on Cardin-Cochran Amendment**

Reconnecting America President John Robert Smith has been working closely with several national organizations to advance an amendment to the Senate transportation bill, known as the Cardin-Cochran amendment. The Senate bill, as proposed, sets aside a percentage of funds for a variety of smaller-scale, local transportation projects such as local street safety improvements, main street revitalizations, bus stop and rail station access improvements, and safe routes to school. These projects make a significant difference in people’s daily lives by making it easier and safer for them to get where they need to go. Unfortunately, the bill would give control over these funds directly to state DOTs, which could decide unilaterally what local projects to fund under this program, or could decide to use all of those funds for state purposes.

Recognizing that communities’ needs are best understood by the local officials who interact every day with the citizens they represent - attending the same church, shopping at the same grocery store, sharing the same roads, sidewalks, buses, and bridges – Smith worked to find strong champions in the Senate for an amendment to address this issue. Introduced by Senators Ben Cardin, Democrat of Maryland, and Thad Cochran, Republican of Mississippi, the “local control” amendment would give local officials a direct say in how this pot of funding is used, rather than leaving the decision-making entirely up to the state.

Due to an outpouring of support for this amendment from local communities around the country, the amendment has been accepted into the Senate bill, giving local communities more ability to invest in projects that will improve safety, accessibility, and quality of life for their residents.

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“What do you do when people need a ride to kidney dialysis?” asked Jim Moulton, director of Addison County Transit Resources (ACTR) in Middlebury, Vermont. “You can’t just tell them no.”

This is just one of the many questions that Moulton, like many other rural transit providers, must deal with daily. Transit agencies in rural areas and small towns face unique challenges in providing transportation and increasing mobility choices for their residents:

- Many rural places are characterized by long distances between destinations and small town residents often must travel a long way to reach specialized services or venues in larger towns and cities.
- The rural population in America is older than average, and older Americans experience more mobility challenges as their ability to drive wanes.
- Small towns and rural places have become increasingly isolated from larger population centers as intercity bus and rail access has declined over the last several decades.
- The cost of transportation in small town communities is high given the long distances they must travel, and their household budgets are tied to the cost of gasoline for the family car, the primary – and in many cases only – means of getting around.
- According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, more than 1.6 million rural households do not have access to a car and are transit dependent.

These factors suggest that small towns and rural areas would benefit from transportation alternatives and enhancements. Yet there seems to be a myth that rural communities are not as reliant on transit and do not need the same investments in transit. But the rural transit providers we spoke with beg to differ.

According to Connie Garber, transportation director of York County Community Action in Maine, “We all are headed for the same goal: a more robust economy that helps all of the people in the communities we serve.”

In Addison County, Vermont, for example, almost 73 percent of ACTR’s riders are transit dependent. In addition to fixed-route bus services, ACTR relies on a bank of 40 volunteer drivers that take residents to much needed life saving treatment or a simple run to the grocery store. Without volunteer programs like these, rural transit agencies would not fare well because of the limited funds and resources.

In Maine, Garber estimates that volunteer drivers provided more than $16 million worth of time in 2011. That is a significant investment that demonstrates the flexibility that is needed to deal with rural transit issues. Garber was also involved in the creation of a trolley line, the Shoreline Explorer, which significantly helped residents to get to work in a local tourist area. Garber, along with the local Chamber of Commerce and other stakeholders, collaborated not only to increase access to jobs for local employees, but also to contribute to the economic viability of local businesses and connect various communities in the area.

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In an upcoming report on small towns and rural areas, Reconnecting America reveals stories of transit agencies enhancing transit mobility, providing a means for people to sustain themselves, and creating transit investments that contribute to strong local economies.

The report focuses on small towns and rural areas—loosely defined as places with populations of 50,000 or less. Based on our initial research we found that small communities are taking a new approach to economic development by using new intermodal transit centers or downtown circulator buses to catalyze private investment in main street areas and improve connections between people and jobs.

We also found that transit investments often require piecing together funding from many sources, especially in today’s constrained financial climate. Transit agencies must be flexible to deal with daily demands that come with being a smaller system. And as Garber put it, “Funds come in little boxes, but people don’t.”

The ACTR Shuttle Bus System is made up of six different bus routes including connections to Rutland and Burlington. Their Dial-a-Ride (demand-response) System takes commuters, elders and persons with disabilities, Medicaid-eligible residents and many other vulnerable populations to work, doctors’ appointments, grocery stores and meal sites.

### Table 1: Snapshot of Agencies Interviewed

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>AGENCY</th>
<th>POPULATION</th>
<th>PROJECT</th>
<th>FUNDING SOURCE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>IMPROVED BUS NETWORK</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Addison County, VT</td>
<td>Addison County Transit Resources</td>
<td>37,000</td>
<td>Coordination with various partners on a ferry, increased shuttle routes</td>
<td>Federal (Rural Transit Assistance Program), State, Philanthropic</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CIRCULATOR</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>York County, ME</td>
<td>York County Community Action (Shoreline Explorer)</td>
<td>197,000</td>
<td>Trolley Bus</td>
<td>Federal, State, Local (business and individual)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>INTERMODAL TRANSIT CENTERS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Spearfish, SD</td>
<td>Prairie Hills Transit</td>
<td>10,400</td>
<td>Transit Facility with day care</td>
<td>Federal (ARRA), land contributed by the City</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>INTERCITY TRANSIT/RAIL IMPROVEMENTS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fredericksburg, VA</td>
<td>Virginia Railway Express</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>Commuter rail track expansion</td>
<td>Federal (stimulus funds)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Complete communities must also be inclusive of households of all incomes. And because neighborhoods with all of these amenities can come with a high cost premium, special attention must be paid to ensure these communities remain affordable to families of various compositions and incomes.

Building complete communities around transit requires new partnerships and approaches to investment and implementation. The booklet, “TOD 205 – Families and Transit-Oriented Development: Creating Complete Communities for All,” outlines how TOD planning can integrate planning for the elements of a complete community.

**How TOD Can Support Family-Friendly Communities and High-Quality Education**

High-quality educational opportunities are one of the most important factors that families consider when choosing a place to live. TOD can enhance those opportunities as well as non-educational amenities if the planning process is done in tandem with community planning. The second half of the booklet describes a series of steps communities can undertake to meld these two fields and provides snapshots of communities across the country successfully achieving synergies between high-quality education and TOD. These steps include:

- Know your educational landscape
- Engage school stakeholders, families, and young people in transportation and TOD planning
- Create a shared vision linking community, regional, and educational prosperity
- Support a family-friendly complete community through comprehensive services and desirable amenities

**10 Core Connections between TOD and Families**

1. School quality plays a major role in families’ housing choices.
2. A wide mix of housing unit types is needed to attract diverse families.
3. School funding is intricately related to the housing unit mix.
4. Student participation in afterschool activities may depend on transit access.
5. Children with multimodal transit alternatives can access the increasing landscape of school options.
6. Teachers benefit from mixed-income TOD that incorporates workforce housing.
7. TOD design principles support walkability and safety for children and families.
8. The mix of uses and transit connectivity inherent in TOD can bring family-serving amenities and services closer to residential areas.
9. Integrating schools with TOD planning provides opportunities for the shared use of public space.
10. TOD offers opportunities for renovating and building new schools in developments, which draw families.

1 The Center for Cities & Schools is an action-oriented think tank whose mission is to promote high-quality education as an essential component of urban and metropolitan vitality to create equitable, healthy, and sustainable communities for all.
Reconnecting America recently joined forces with several other organizations with deep experience in transportation and sustainable development to form Livability Solutions. The purpose of this partnership is to work with communities on transportation, land use, placemaking, environmental issues, and public involvement, with the goal of achieving livability, smart growth, and sustainability. The other partners in Livability Solutions are the Project for Public Spaces, Center for Neighborhood Technology, Walkable and Livable Communities Institute, National Center for Bicycling and Walking, National Charrette Institute, Local Government Commission, Center for Transportation Excellence, Congress for New Urbanism, Surface Transportation Policy Project and Newport City Renaissance Corporation.

As a first step in solidifying this partnership, Livability Solutions applied for and was awarded a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to provide free technical assistance to communities around the country through the Building Blocks program. This program funds quick, targeted assistance to communities that face common development problems. Three other nonprofit organizations — Forterra (formerly Cascade Land Conservancy), Global Green USA, and Smart Growth America — also received competitively awarded grants under this program this year to help communities achieve their sustainable development goals.

After putting out a call for applications in October of 2011, the Livability Solutions team received 64 applications and selected 10 communities to receive free technical assistance within the next year. Each community will receive a one- or two-day training session with a livability expert from the Livability Solutions team on the issue of their choice. Reconnecting America sat on the selection committee and identified the Gulf Regional Planning Commission in Gulfport, Mississippi as a place that could benefit from our innovative tools and expertise. We will be working with them to develop a typology for transit-oriented development (TOD) and to explore mixed-income TOD strategies to lower housing and transportation costs for residents of the region.

The other nine communities selected for technical assistance are University City District, Philadelphia, PA.; West Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, Eau Claire, WI.; Lower Eastside Action Plan, Detroit, MI.; Toledo-Lucas County Sustainability Commission, Maumee, OH.; Colfax on the Hill, Inc., Denver, CO.; City of Blue Springs, MO.; Charlotte County, FL.; Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention, Little Rock, AK.; and Antithesis Research, Wellpoint, WA.

The Building Blocks Technical Assistance program is only the beginning of a great partnership for the Livability Solutions team. We are continuing to pursue other opportunities to work with communities around the country on their planning-related challenges and opportunities. There will also be future rounds of Building Blocks Technical Assistance, with another call for applications expected in the fall of 2012.

For more information on Livability Solutions, visit livabilitysolutions.org. View the official press release announcing the award recipients here. For more information on the EPA Building Blocks Technical Assistance program, including details on the other teams, visit the EPA’s website.
The Senate is expected to conclude debate on the reauthorization bill within the next week or two, while the House timetable is less certain as they work on revamping their bill. Given the impending deadline of March 31, it appears likely that another short-term extension of SAFETEA-LU will be needed.

TOD and Livable Communities Legislation:
Two bills related to TOD and livable communities have been introduced in the Senate. “Jump-starting Transit-Oriented Development Act” (S. 2053) was introduced by Senator Bennet (D-CO) and Senator Warner (D-VA). This bill would create a TOD planning grant program and a TOD infrastructure credit facility to provide federal loans and loan guarantees to support the infrastructure associated with TOD: lighting, utility relocation, land acquisition, etc. A portion of the planning grant program was included in the Senate reauthorization bill, and Bennet and Warner will continue working to try to include the credit facility in the reauthorization bill through an amendment on the Senate floor.

The Livable Communities Act of 2011 (S. 1621) was introduced by Senator Menendez (D-NJ) with 18 Democratic co-sponsors. Like the Livable Communities Act introduced in the previous Congress, the bill would formally authorize the Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities at HUD, and would fund grant programs for integrated regional planning and implementation activities. While the TOD planning program in the Senate reauthorization bill reflects some of the goals of the LCA, Senator Menendez is looking for opportunities to move the full bill forward, which will be increasingly challenging as the legislative session winds down in anticipation of the November elections.

The Center for Transit-Oriented Development (CTOD) wrapped up the Federal Transit Administration-sponsored webinar series launched last year in June with a webinar on joint development last month that attracted more than 200 participants.

The FTA webinar series focused on various TOD-related topics, has proven to be valuable for planners, practitioners, housing advocates, MPOs, local, state and federal DOTs, transit agencies, sustainable communities grantees, as well as elected officials and other decision-makers. Webinar topics included Understanding Mixed-Income TOD; Corridor Planning and TOD; TOD Database Utility and Applications; Value Capture Strategies and TOD; Employment, Transit and TOD; Climate and TOD and Making Joint Development Work.

Recordings of the webinars and copies of presentations from the speakers are available on Reconnecting America’s webinar page.

In the coming months, CTOD will host a variety of webinars aimed at creating sustainable and complete communities. Watch for the registration link for the following webinars: TOD 101, Putting Transit to Work in Small Town and Rural Areas, TOD and Families.