



TRANSIT PLANNING BASICS, MARKET AREAS, AND COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

Presented by Michael Larson and Michael Mechtenberg

Thursday, September 22, 2016

12:00 – 1:00 PM

Webinar Summary: The region is experiencing a growth in transit use and interest in expanded transit services. This emphasizes the important relationship between local land use and transportation plans, and regional plans for transit facilities and service. This event will cover the elements of regional and local planning that influence the success of transit service. Included in this discussion is an overview of Transit Market Areas, a key requirement for communities to relate to other elements of comprehensive plans. This event will also highlight opportunities and best practices that demonstrate how communities can support transit planning through their comprehensive planning process and implementation. *Questions and Answers:*

1. What happens if my community can't meet the density requirements for transit? Will we be penalized?

Communities should keep in mind that the minimum density requirement applies only to areas that the City has identified for residential development or redevelopment. It is also an average minimum, so depending on context communities could have a lower density minimum for guiding land use and some parts of the station areas along the corridor could have a higher minimum density. As we did our research, we believe that the overall minimum densities are a reasonable expectation for communities.

What happens also is that developing transit or identifying transitways, and doing general station area planning has been a collaborative approach; we will want to continue that. We recognize that there are both opportunities and challenges related to development, as well as how to increase density, how to make a community more walkable, and setting the stage for investment. We expect those challenges to do adequate parcel size, density related to design, and in some cases it may be that the market is not yet ready for higher density. But your community can set the stage for comp plan amendments for the time that might be better.

Staff at the Metropolitan Council, including sector reps, can help you explore this issue in more detail.

2. How should we address transitways if the project has uncertainties like where stations will be or funding for the project?

Like the comprehensive plans last time where there was an uncertainty if a community has a preference for an alignment and station location at the time of adoption, a city should articulate that in their comp plan. If your community is in the middle of exploring alignment or location alternatives, your plan could articulate the strengths and weaknesses or the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative. Your approach can set the stage for a future amendment once the alignment and station location decisions are more concrete. In the meantime, your community needs choose an interim approach that could either encourage development in likely station locations, support the status quo, or maybe something in between. In all cases, your community should articulate your roles and responsibilities at the particular stage that you are in in the transitway development process.

3. If my community has done other planning, like previous station area plans or a bicycle plan that addresses access to transit, can we incorporate that into our comprehensive plan? – Larson

Communities can incorporate their small area and bicycle plans (or ped) by reference. However, you should include a synopsis of the small area or bicycle plan in your comprehensive plan. I have some words of caution. You will want to make certain that this approach does not create inconsistencies or conflicts between the documents. Small area plans can be either ambiguous or present very specific ideas about development or public infrastructure. If you have concerns about this, you might consider using the small area plan or bicycle plan to inform your comprehensive plan, rather than incorporating it by reference. Ultimately, planning documents should provide clarity to both policy makers and the development community about what will be supported and under what conditions and timeframes.

4. Who do we talk to about regular route service if we are outside the transit capital levy district?

I would recommend contacting your local Metropolitan Council member, or their sector representative to discuss local options. You can find who your Metropolitan Council member is by going onto their site, metro council.org.

5. How can we request changes or improvements to bus service in our community?

The best place to start would be to contact the transit planner who manages service in your area. I'm told, that there's a map on the resource handout that will identify the planners by the community that they match. If you're not in Metro Transit's service area, please contact your local provider directly. The transit planner should be able to walk you through your existing service, including any recent or future changes. If you feel that additional service is warranted—you're looking down the road and you see something big coming up—please start the conversation early with them. It takes a long time, at least six months, to really go through the process of analyzing the request, connecting with city staff or community stakeholders, developing the new schedule and then finally having the service hit the street. Some of the stuff that we think about when adding new services are potential ridership, the cost of operating the service, and vehicle and operator availability.

6. On the Guidelines for Activity Levels, how did you calculate the guideline for 7,000 residents, employees, or students for station areas?

The guideline is intended to measure people, and those could be residents, employees, or students in the areas, meant to be a benchmark to achieve stations as being focal points of activity over time. Staff here at the Council did research looking at peer regions related to planning for activity and a mix of uses. We also considered criteria on land use related to the Federal Transit Administration's "New Starts" criteria, related to competitive funding applications for projects. We've also reality tested that with existing transit areas, to compare where communities were at. The number of most station areas in communities surpass or meet this benchmark. For comparison purposes, a typical neighborhood in South Minneapolis is around 7,000. As you might expect, places like the University of Minnesota or downtown Minneapolis, far surpass this benchmark.

For communities that don't surpass this level of activity currently, we hope this guideline is a way for communities to think about their station areas as becoming focal points of activity over time. The success of the transit system depends on areas becoming these focal points of higher density housing, employment centers, civic destinations, schools, and those kinds of things, so that transit services are serving people in the region. Different communities may have different challenges related to reaching the benchmark. Maybe some issues about connectivity, natural or man-made barriers like what we discussed earlier in the presentation. Communities should discuss those challenges in their plan. We

talked about minimum densities for residential development; the planning process could really help to identify what opportunities there might be overtime, preserve those opportunities, like market studies that may lay the groundwork or urban design studies that establish some expectations about how to incorporate that additional activity into the future of the station.

7. My community has seen some recent multifamily development. Can these projects be served by transit?

It depends. As mentioned in the presentation, some of the factors that we consider when adding service, we're looking at areas that support transit service. And that would be: are there destinations nearby that might generate rides, what's the pedestrian access to and from the development, what's the road networks to and from the development, and is there any existing service that's already in the area that they could either utilize directly or could potentially extend or re-route to serve that area. But without knowing the details of this particular situation, the best place to start is by going on that map and identifying who the planner is that represents your community and contacting them

8. If a community has done other planning, like previous station area plans or bicycle plans that address access to transit can we incorporate that into our comprehensive plan?

You sure can. Communities can incorporate smaller plans, maybe you've done a bicycle or pedestrian plans for your community, you can incorporate those plans by reference. What I really strongly recommended is that you provide us a synopsis of the most important details of those plans, reference to specific sections in your comp plan. I do have some words of caution about doing that: make sure that such an approach doesn't create some inconsistencies or conflicts between the documents, depending on the age of the plan, if it was a smaller area plan developed before the new regional policy plans, then they didn't specifically address density or activity levels or some factors like that. We want to make sure that there's an internal consistency. Sometimes small area plans can be somewhat ambiguous, sometimes they can be very specific, so that's something to think about going forward if you do further small area planning, subsequent to your comp plan update. Ultimately, it's really important to make sure that the planning documents speak clearly and provides clear direction for policymakers, planning commissioners, and local development community about what the expectations are, what locations, and when. It's really up to you to figure out a best approach.

9. Are there other transportation options besides regular bus service?

Absolutely. The Met Council supports communities throughout the entire region with carpool and vanpool services and other travel demand management options. I am not an expert on this field, but I will say that there are a lot of resources on our website. Go to metrotransit.org/how-to-ride, and there is a whole section on "how-to-ride", that walks you through the processes and options that are available.

10. How can a community change its Transit Market Area?

Transit Market Areas are based on data and research conducted at a geography level of Census Block Group. That data can change over time, such as areas that are becoming denser or more inter-connected will be reflected in the next census. Communities planning for growth may see their Transit Market Area change as those areas fall. Areas in your community that aren't expecting any change, like fully established areas that are unlikely to see any kind of growth are likely to remain the same. Just remember that Transit Market Areas are a general planning tool. They do not substitute for route planning or service planning, and they do not guarantee that a certain kind of transit service would be either successful or unsuccessful.

11. I'm still a little confused by average minimum densities? Can you give me an example of how you would calculate that?

Sure thing. I'll provide a very simple example. Say you guided 10-acres of land at a range of 10-20 units per acre. Then you guide area of the same size, another 10-acres at 20-30 units per acre. The minimum for one range is 10. The other minimum for range is 20. The average of that is 15. This is a simple way to look at that. Your community should take a look at it, to see how to overall guide your density. Obviously, it's a little more complicated in practice if two of the areas had been different sizes, then we would calculate a weighted average.

Please send additional questions or comments to angela.torres@metc.state.mn.us.