

A TRANSIT ALLIANCE BEST PRACTICES STUDY:  
CREATING AND SUSTAINING "PEOPLE-ORIENTED PLACES"

CAN COLORADO ACCOMMODATE PEOPLE  
AS WELL AS WE DO AUTOMOBILES?

**A Note From The Authors:**

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*We began this research project with the knowledge that successful transit-oriented developments are fundamentally about people and the choices they make. Our previous study, "The Invasion of the TRUFFLES" concluded that transit-oriented developments "TODs" need to be POPs to be successful – POPs are People-Oriented Places. Naturally, we were intrigued when we were asked by Transit Alliance to apply the knowledge gained in our earlier work to their mission of developing a balanced multi-modal transportation system for the people of Colorado. "Invasion of the TRUFFLES" may be found at [peakpr.com](http://peakpr.com).*

When Western Civilization first washed across the plains about 150 years ago it came in wagons and trains. Then followed a society that focused foremost on automobiles and built places such as suburbs, shopping malls, strip centers and big box retail centers.

The resulting exurban sprawl across the West is apparent. What also is apparent is that the West continues to grow and that we must find new ways to accommodate people and their changing needs.

The people of metro Denver have their ear to the rail and are steering down a different track. We have the opportunity to lead the West in creating and sustaining a growing number of people-oriented places. Our clogged metro Denver highways already are producing record numbers of light rail riders as we begin to invest another \$4.7 billion in a mass transit system. Soon, that system will serve more than 20 metro municipalities through more than 50 transit stations, many with the potential for transit-oriented development (TOD).

Creating and sustaining people-oriented places should be the goal of every arterial-clogged or economically challenged community in Colorado.

- The entire front-range metroplex, especially the rapidly developing northern municipal areas need an aggressive transportation initiative as effective as FasTracks will be in metro Denver.

- I-70 through the mountains soon will clog daily as it now does on peak weekends unless a solution is found to head off this economic heart attack. A permanently stalled I-70 would create a much greater Continental Divide between our eastern and western slopes and damage our tourism and trade.
- Likewise, travel from point to point across the Rockies of Colorado is slowing and future transportation solutions must be initiated, not just contemplated. Just as important, we must consider how to help our plains communities revive their economies.

It's time to act. Metro Denver already has. Now, we must complete the transportation puzzle by engaging people across Colorado to resolve how to keep people and goods moving across our state and the West in the future.

The Transit Alliance envisions FasTracks as the hub in a wheel of modern transportation choices. A complete wheel of choices would represent a balanced multi-modal transportation system for Coloradoans. That wheel of choices should include commuter rail, along with bus rapid transit, suburb-to-suburb fast connections, plains and mountain interconnections, along with adequate bike pathways, sidewalks and more.

What do we stand to gain?

As Patty Silverstein, chief economist, Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce and Metro Denver Economic Development Corporation, owner, Research Development Partners says, "Metro Denver will be in the international spotlight with the construction of FasTracks. We cannot even place a dollar value on this enhancement of the community's image and character."

On the flip side, the downside is calculable. "The risk of getting this wrong is enormous," points out Tom Clark, executive vice president, Metro Denver Economic Development Corporation, which is helping lead the regional charge toward smarter development choices, including rail.

## TRANSPORTATION OPENS THE DOOR TO CHOICES AND OPPORTUNITY

Making smart transportation and community building choices for the future requires that we regard changes that are occurring in our society today. For one, the make up of our society is changing quickly. The new West will include many more seniors, singles, couples and minorities and less "traditional" nuclear families.

Metro Denver voters have a big stake in the future success of transit and the coming of a wider variety of smart transportation choices. As we begin to leave the automobile behind in Colorado, we need also to consider the necessary changes that go with creating "people-oriented places" for the folks who will live across our state in the future. What will future Coloradoans think of the transportation choices we are making today?

This is a question that Transit Alliance, Regional Transportation District (RTD), Denver Regional Council of Governments, Metro Denver Economic Development Corporation, Home Builders Association of Metro Denver and others are asking.

Bill Struble is a middle-age modern pioneer of sorts who is helping re-invigorate the area northeast of downtown Denver where his German immigrant family once settled. Bused from the burbs to Denver East High School in the 1970s, Struble “felt a calling back” and now lives a stone’s throw from his family’s original homes and just down the street from family icehouse where he used to saw blocks of ice. Of mass transit and the urbanization of the area, Struble, a top producer with Re/Max Alliance City Living, says: “It’s bringing us together so that we may enjoy each other more.”

Struble has greeted people from around the world to Denver since his high school days.

That’s seems to be what success in people-oriented places is all about, greeting people.

It’s about glimpsing into the future and intercepting people who have yet to arrive in the place that they will one day be. Intercepting the future is closer to calculus than it is arithmetic, the experts agree.

Calculating the future, though, leads us to back to simple values. It’s about ending people’s struggle,” says Bill Sirois, transit-oriented development manager, Regional Transportation District. He says that RTD will be a willing partner in planning a future that helps resolve people’s anxiety. What’s that mean? Sirois says its about safety and comfort, transporting people from place to place quickly, efficiently, so that they can lay back and enjoy the experience. Sirois and a growing league of regional partners are setting about to brand as well as build each of the corridors of metro Denver’s emerging balanced multi-modal transportation system.

Helping interconnect the pieces is Transit Alliance.

“Green solutions and economic prosperity become synonymous,” says Matt Baker, treasurer, Transit Alliance, executive director, Environment Colorado when asked to look down the track to the future. “FasTracks is a giant step toward a balanced multi-modal transportation future,” says Baker. He invites a dialogue on state issues and encourages the community to think in terms of total solutions. “What about I-70? What about northern Colorado.”

For the time being there is plenty to do in metro Denver, according to the experts we have contacted for this study. In brief they say it’s time to get busy connecting the pieces now that regional leadership on TOD is taking shape.

Hopefully, various jurisdictions will partner to resolve major issues such as developing master plans and adopting zoning that reflect the true will and best endeavor of each community in the metro area.

Peter Park, planning director, City of Denver says, “Zoning is the key.” He points out that Denver is underway with the process and progress is being made on many fronts metrowide. But, as RTD’s Sirois says about the emerging coalition of regional leadership on TOD, “We are speeding things up.”

“Being urban means respecting our place,” says Peter Park, City of Denver. “We need to stop spending on transportation and start investing. Our focus needs to be on building great places.”

We are pleased herein to present some of the latest thought regarding how to create and sustain a growing number of people-oriented places in Colorado and the world.

## ENGAGE THE PUBLIC EARLY AND OFTEN

Once the glitter of rail begins to fade one nagging question will begin to surface all across metro Denver: who will succeed in creating and sustaining people-oriented places along the various rail corridors that will snake across the region?

The same holds true for all points in between.

There is already a tremendous surge in TOD and POP interest in metro Denver, so the rising tide effect may be over and the beginning of really innovative solutions may be just around the corner as a more competitive environment takes shape and people’s choices become apparent.

Success stories are being born – packed with tales of great challenge and achievement.

The strategic Gates Rubber Company site gives us a glimpse into our future, where a community coalition, Campaign for Responsible Development, negotiated for a year with Cherokee Denver LLC before Denver City Council approved public financing and development plans could move forward.

What took place during that year?

The community, council and developer arrived at an agreement regarding “community benefits” that will be associated with the site, according to an opinion editorial published in *The Denver Post*. That’s a whole other story. But, the essence of that story should be considered in the planning of every future station. The mood of the local community is a major factor in the equation of TOD success, as is the mood of the region and the state, as this study clearly concludes.

“Engage the public early and often,” says Peter Park of the City of Denver. “There is a great deal more up front work if you are going to get it right,” says Eliza Prah, marketing director, Continuum Partners, LLC. Continuum is dedicated to creating and sustaining people-oriented places, such as Lakewood, Colorado’s Belmar District, which is the first downtown for the suburban city born in the 1960s. “What you do is avoid a lot of problems later on,” she says. One problem Prah avoided at Belmar was a lack of power. “For two years I kept saying, we need more power,” says Prah of designing the district after seeing others come up short. Today she points out the district’s large-scale festivals are able to handle the power demand that comes with such events. “3-D thinking instead of 2-D thinking,” says Tom Gougeon, partner, Continuum Partners, LLC, of the definitive difference between successful POP planning and not so successful. “You need to think about the whole neighborhood,” he said, adding that a POP needs to be a fundamental building block of the larger community.

Considering all the challenges, though, how do you create and sustain a place that is oriented toward people?

Is it all in the 4D's (Pedestrian and Bike Friendly DESIGN, DENSITY, DISTANCE to transit and DIVERSITY)? While design is important, interviewees told us the physical environment is not enough. It sets the stage. It establishes the framework. But, it does not guarantee success. Several interviewees cited firsthand examples of places that had been built to exacting standards – incorporated all the “right” elements and were failing to live up to expectations.

As author and new urbanist Doug Porter says, it all distills down to choices, connections and collaboration. We couldn't agree more and we encourage you to study Porter's work, along with the work of other POP thought leaders.

## THE PEOPLE OF THE WEST ARE CHANGING DRAMATICALLY

It has always been about people and the choices they make. But the people are changing and as a result, the choices they are making are changing, too. From the end of World War II until today, the choices for most people have been limited. “Drive till you qualify,” was the advice. When the car first became king in the 1950s, metro Denver was ripe for road and a sea of suburbs came pouring across the plains.

But now, urban villages, town centers, transit-oriented developments and main streets are becoming a popular option for many people in the West. We see that trend growing steeply in the metro Denver area with the advent of FasTracks.

For the time being, the term build it and they will come applies to metro Denver's rail stations. But, that is only because rail for the moment is new and people are curious. That will all change this fall when the I-25 rail corridor into the southeast metro region opens and the majority of our population is exposed to the lifestyles associated with rail.

The glitter will be gone and the competition will begin to heat up as over the next several years more than 50 transit stations emerge and consumer expectations shift radically.

This leads to a complex community development question: what do you build, where do you build it and how do you get the community to support what you are doing, so that you can build it and how long will all that take? That is why RTD is preparing a guide to TOD development and other organizations are stepping in to coach the community through the process of utilizing mass transit to its fullest potential. “This is going to take a level of cooperation and partnership that we simply have not yet experienced together,” says Jennifer Schaufele, executive director, Denver Regional Council of Governments, one of the leading groups in the push to make the region more people-oriented.

According to the book *"Place Making,"* published by the Urban Land Institute, demand for residential properties in town centers continues to exceed expectations in a wide variety of markets. Most surprising of all is the strong demand for housing above retail shops and offices.

The people who are attracted to urban centers whether they are town centers, main streets, urban villages or transit-oriented developments are making a choice. They are choosing the benefits of an in-town lifestyle and associated urban amenities over a suburban lifestyle.

The neat thing is that about 20 metro Denver municipalities are about to have the opportunity to support denser more urban centers, when a short time ago they were for the most part just bedroom communities to Denver.

The question is who will succeed and how will that change affect our entire marketplace. Transit Alliance believes that those who provide smart people-oriented choices will have the most to gain.

## WHAT DOES THIS WAVE OF CHANGE BODE FOR THE BURBS?

Suburban living is far from going the way of the stegosaurus.

The critics of urban centers, such as Joel Kotkin of the New American Foundation, cite studies that provide evidence that demand for suburban living and single family homes is still strong. "The preference for suburban-style living continues to be particularly strong among younger families," he wrote in a January 14, 2006 editorial in the Wall Street Journal. He also cited recent studies that estimate roughly 51 percent of Americans prefer to live in the suburbs.

"No single type of housing can serve the varied needs of today's diverse households," according to an article published by the Smart Growth Network. Suburbs continue to fulfill a need for many people and they are still in strong demand.

That's fine.

Fortunately, every metro Denver suburb soon will have the opportunity to create urban centers and even whole downtowns where none have ever existed or where they have nearly died.

In the future metro Denver when you say you are headed downtown, you will need to clarify which one.

## BEGIN WITH PLACE

Have you ever seen a cow path on a university campus?

Those are the trampled dirty strips across grassy areas where planners should have put pedestrian-oriented sidewalks. Experts agree if you want to succeed in creating and sustaining a people-oriented place, then get up and move around.

Get up high. Move around the region, the district. Walk down the streets. Drive. Observe patterns. Talk to people. Get to know the community. Watch the evolution of place across the span of the day; consider the seasons. Study the area culture and the true wants and desires of people who come and go. Look at demographics, but, just as important, look at values and shifting moods and beliefs.

Keep in mind, too, it's a lot easier to intercept people where they are than to change their patterns altogether.

## CONSIDER THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Incorporating the 4 Ds – Pedestrian Friendly DESIGN, DENSITY, DISTANCE to transit and DIVERSITY – is critical to the success of a POPs. People-oriented places must be designed for people to move about freely – gather, shop, mingle, work and unwind.

They need to become activity centers or “destinations,” be accessible by all modes of transportation and provide “linkages” deep into surrounding communities.

That is why metro Denver train stations are popular; they provide a growing group of people with a choice they desire.

Everyone who gets off a train, or bus or out of a car is a pedestrian.

Our job is to create a physical environment that entices them.

How people feel and where they go after they get off the train – or other mode of transportation -- is critically important to the success of people-oriented places.

Do people feel safe?

Do they feel comfortable in the environment?

Is the mixed-use development near the station welcoming and inviting, or do people feel the need to make a bee-line for their car?

How conducive is the environment to multiple modes of transportation?

Are there right-sized bike and pedestrian paths into surrounding communities?

Or, do local streets become congested with automobile traffic as people race from the parking lots and head for home?

If they go straight from mass transit to their cars, a large social and economic opportunity is missed.

According to the knowledgeable group of leaders interviewed for this study, getting the physical environment right is important – “it sets the stage.” But it is no guarantee of success. In fact, getting the physical environment “too right” could actually limit its success.

## LEAVING YOUR POP "UNFINISHED" MAY BE KEY

There needs to be some sort of "unfinished" characteristic in a people-oriented place because people evolve over time and life is dynamic, society is dynamic, people are dynamic. If something is the same all the time and it is finished, that implies that there is nothing else you can add to it that makes it unique and makes it yours."

One interviewee told us that when you are designing and building a place, design it to somewhat less than 90 percent. The amenities, the seating, the type of seating should be left undefined and flexible.

Another interviewee explained that he had tried to figure out what teenagers would enjoy in a place. He explained that what they learned is that with teenagers you leave the space under-designed, because no matter what you design they will want to tailor the space to their needs.

Flexibility should be designed into the place also to accommodate changes associated with seasons, holidays, occasions and even the changes associated with each day.

## MAKE YOUR PLACE PEDESTRIAN FRIENDLY

How to create a pedestrian friendly physical environment has been well researched and documented.

How to make sidewalks and streets walk-able, how to create outdoor living rooms, how to calm traffic, and the importance of way-finding signage and a host of other tactics are available in numerous books, articles and research papers. At a recent conference on smart growth, more than 100 books and pamphlets were on sale offering advice on how to get the physical environment right. We've also included in the appendix a few of the "to do lists" we found in the literature.

