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Building Support for Transit-Oriented Development: Do Community-Engagement Toolkits Work?

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### Authors

Machell, Erin  
Reinhalter, Troy  
Chapple, Karen

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**Building Support for Transit-Oriented Development:  
Do Community-Engagement Toolkits Work?**

Erin Machell, Troy Reinhalter, and Karen Chapple  
University of California, Berkeley

# Building Support for Transit-Oriented Development:

## Do Community-Engagement Toolkits Work?



## **Authors**

Erin Machell, Troy Reinhalter, Karen Chapple

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University of California  
Center for Community Innovation  
316 Wurster Hall #1870  
Berkeley, CA 94720-1870

<http://communityinnovation.berkeley.edu>

**August 2009**

# **Building Support for Transit-Oriented Development:**

## **Do Community-Engagement Toolkits Work?**



**CENTER FOR COMMUNITY INNOVATION**

at the Institute of Urban and Regional Development

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## Introduction

Many metropolitan areas are struggling with how to accommodate future population growth—and are looking to transit-oriented development (TOD) as a potential solution. TODs, in which densely-built, mixed-income housing is placed near transit to create walkable neighborhoods complete with amenities and retail, could house as many as a quarter of the country's new households in coming years.<sup>1</sup> Yet one barrier to building a significant amount of TOD housing is the unwillingness of many local residents to support some of the components of TOD, particularly higher-density construction and mixed-income housing. Often called NIMBYs (short for Not-In-My-Backyard), opposing residents can stop such developments in their tracks.

Planners must “sell” the developments as beneficial to the community and the region, and follow up on their promises by creating good plans and developments. To that end, practitioners have developed successful strategies to both counter resistance and rally community support around projects. The process requires a great deal of community education and outreach at community meetings, often aided by community engagement tools such as PowerPoint presentations, brochures, activities, and other tools created for the purpose. Despite their widespread usage of these tools, however, there is little information about their effectiveness, or lack thereof, when used in the field. There is a need for research on what about these tools works, what doesn't, and in which situations and contexts. It is this gap that this study will attempt to fill, to help inform the work of the developers, planners, and community engagement groups that use these community engagement tools in their work.

Using focus groups in our case study region of the San Francisco Bay Area, this research begins the process of showing what does and does not work in these tools, and makes suggestions for how they may be altered in light of our findings. Focus group members found much to admire and much to find fault with in the tools. In general, focus group members responded to credibility, openness and honesty; relatable and specific facts, stories and examples, especially about real people as well as real places; community benefits; and connections to their existing understandings of their lives and communities. Conversely, they were quick to pick up on any kind of manipulation or deceptiveness, unsupported ideas, or ignorance of their particular community, all of which fostered mistrust and undermined the messages of the tools.

## Addressing Community Opposition: Existing Research

Over the last 50 years, planners have become much more sophisticated about the role of persuasion in planning processes. Engaging the community is an ongoing process of education, relationship-building and gaining trust, identifying allies in the community, addressing opposition, and building support.<sup>2</sup> These are processes that can be manipulative, if planners use them exclusively to push through a pre-existing agenda, or they can empower both planners and the public through a collaborative process.<sup>3</sup> Many planners view collaboration and persuasion as a process in which diverse stakeholders share information and ideas, and in so doing create a shared group meaning from which to move forward. In this light it is the discussion and process themselves that make information and decisions meaningful and legitimate.<sup>4</sup> The role of the planner is one of telling persuasive stories about the future, in which stakeholders can recognize themselves as characters acting in a believable way toward the resolution; when the narrative is poorly constructed and residents cannot see themselves as the players within, planners often fail in their aims.<sup>5</sup> In the end, it tends to be the legitimacy of the process more than the specific outcome that makes a planning process accepted by the residents.<sup>6</sup>

Planners have applied these approaches to persuasion to the problem of NIMBYism. Most NIMBY sentiments stem from fear of the unknown, a desire to hold on to the status quo, and a feeling of powerlessness or resentment in the face of planning processes that are out of their control.<sup>7</sup> These feelings are often expressed in the form of predictable fears, concerns and myths about TOD, density and affordable housing. Such fears include lowered property values, higher traffic volumes, overcrowding, overburdened social infrastructure (like schools and police), unwanted people moving into the neighborhood, and a generally lowered quality of life.

In seeking to persuade opponents (NIMBYs) and rally support for TOD projects, planners stress the importance of engaging the community early, often, sincerely and openly, in an effort to create dialogue. They also recommend building trust and credibility, while being careful with the use of language, avoiding terms such as “density” and “affordability” that are laden with negative connotations.<sup>8</sup> In trying to win over residents, some practitioners emphasize an evidence-based, myth-busting approach that uses studies, images, credible experts and practitioners, development tours, and other positive, concrete examples to reassure residents.<sup>9</sup> Others emphasize meaning- and story-based approaches that reframe the issues in ways that appeal to residents' values about people, community and society.<sup>10</sup> Particular tactics for specific situations include emphasizing community (as opposed to regional) benefits

that accrue from well-designed TOD; emphasizing design, neighborhood character and community-building in the case of dense development; and in the case of affordable housing, taking pains to humanize its residents while emphasizing good design and management.<sup>11</sup>

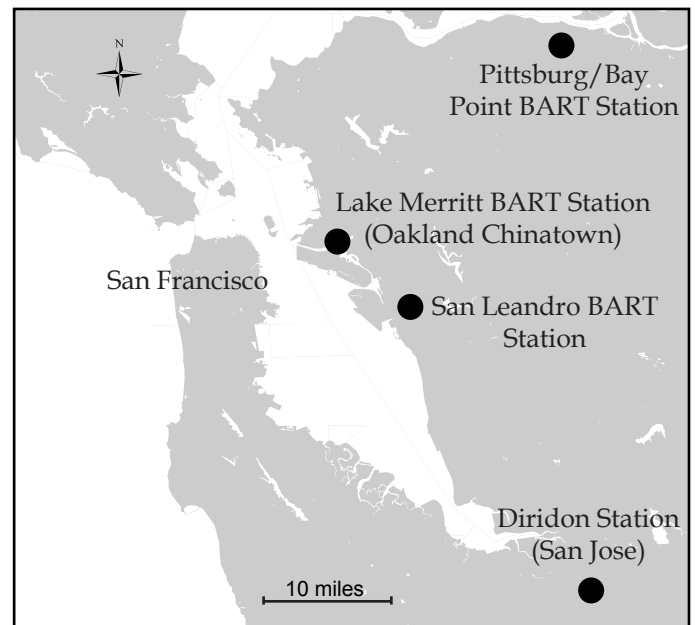
## Methodology

Though the TOD community engagement tools that are the subject of this study reflect these best practices in communicating to the public, there has been little research done on the effectiveness of the tools themselves when planners, developers and community groups use them in the field. In order to begin to fill this research gap and evaluate the effectiveness of the tools, our study conducted four focus groups in different communities around the Bay Area.

The Bay Area serves as an appropriate case because of its recent and ongoing experience with building TODs. TODs may house as many as half of the region's new households between now and 2030, according to estimates from the Association of Bay Area Governments.<sup>12</sup> Since 2000, Bay Area voters have approved \$12 billion for public transit, and there are currently at least 75 TOD planning processes recently completed or underway in the region. The Bay Area is also at the vanguard of the TOD movement nationally, due in no small part to the presence of community and research organizations such as the Great Communities Collaborative (GCC) and others.<sup>13</sup> This condition means that Bay Area communities are unusually well informed about TOD and other development issues, and thus well able to formulate critiques of community engagement tools. On the other hand, the liberal Bay Area political culture, as well as its density relative to other regions of the country, may predispose some of its residents towards attitudes more accepting of TODs. Thus, the findings of this report are likely most generalizable to other large metropolitan areas with pre-existing transit systems.

This research employed focus groups as the study methodology in order to create a forum for participants with different backgrounds and experiences to freely discuss their reactions to and thoughts about the tools, to disagree and argue. Focus groups were held in the following four communities: Pittsburg, CA, near the Pittsburg/Bay Point BART station; San Jose, CA, near Diridon, the current bus and train, and future BART and high-speed rail station; Oakland's Chinatown near the Lake Merritt BART station; and San Leandro, and near the San Leandro BART station (see Figure 1). These communities were chosen because each is in some phase of a TOD planning process, ensuring that most participants would be familiar with TOD concepts and have some kind of preexisting ideas about TOD and planning processes. The four sites represented a variety of settings – from urban

**Figure 1. Focus Group Sites**



(Lake Merritt) to outer ring suburb (Pittsburg) – at a variety of stages in the planning process, from Pittsburg, at the earliest stages of its planning processes, to San Leandro, in the initial stages of implementing a completed TOD plan (see Appendix A for brief background and description on each site).

In each case, focus group members were drawn from the immediate neighborhood around the transit hub in question. Focus group participants were contacted through emails and using contacts from the GCC. Focus groups ranged from four to eight participants each, and the participants were pre-screened for neighborhood only, not opinions, demographics or background. They were compensated for their time either by cash or a free dinner. The participants that ultimately formed the focus groups varied greatly in age, gender, attitude, and background. They ranged from mildly interested residents, to profoundly engaged activists, to professionals in planning or architecture. The participants held widely varied opinions about TOD, from active support to strong resistance and many gradations between. As a self-selected group, there was a bias in participants toward those that were already engaged and interested in issues surrounding TOD, making our group more savvy and knowledgeable – and critical -- than a randomly selected group of residents would be.

The tools that were tested in this study included powerpoint presentations, brochures, and interactive activities, all of which are geared toward community engagement discussion and education around the topics of density, affordable housing, and transit-oriented development. All of the tools were created by either



## Findings

nonprofit organizations or government agencies, mostly in the early 2000s, and have been widely used in community and planning meetings. The approaches mirror many of the methods common in planning, such as myth busting, citing studies, and using images and stories to refute misperceptions and make TOD and its elements comprehensible (and hopefully welcome).

We altered several of the tools for the focus groups by combining elements from different presentations into one larger presentation, or only including the most relevant parts. In general, tools were matched to focus group communities based on the issues of that community. For example, affordable housing had been a major point of contention in San Leandro, so we primarily tested affordable housing tools in that focus group. While there is no one way of using or presenting the tools, and the ways that different practitioners is likely to make a difference in how the tools are perceived, this was not tested in this study; instead we tested the reactions of community groups to the tools, which we let speak for themselves as much as possible. Descriptions of each of the tools used in the focus groups can be found in Appendix B, and the tools that we presented can be found in their entirety in the online version of the report at <http://communityinnovation.berkeley.edu/publications.html>.

Though there were many elements in the tools that frustrated focus groups, or caused them to lose trust and be skeptical, there were also clearly identifiable features that participants found persuasive, convincing, or that they just plain liked. Regular people and their needs; attractive buildings, design and landscaping; community facilities and benefits to existing residents are all persuasive elements that work well. Each of these are elements that have been identified in the persuasion literature as key elements of building trust and credibility, and we will examine the ways that these were successfully used in the tools we tested.

### *Regular People and Their Needs*

#### *“Put a face on people who live in affordable housing”*

The focus group participants clearly responded to and cared about people. Much of the research about NIMBYism and affordable housing stresses the importance and the effectiveness of humanizing the residents of affordable housing and finding a way to make housing about *people* rather than faceless statistics and the poor masses. Our focus group research bore out this principle, as focus group members consistently responded to the idea of helping others out.

Participants liked and responded to pictures and stories about real people in the tools, and pictures of children and families seemed to be a particular plus. A favorite was the pictures of affordable housing residents on the second side of the NPH affordable housing brochure “Who, What, How & Why?” (see Figure 2): “The family pictures I think are great, ‘cause it really tells about a young family just starting out, people that have started out and are struggling, and then it talks about people that are retiring.” (Gerard, San Leandro); and: “You look at pictures of people, and they’re just regular people, they’re not, you know, they’re just regular people that don’t make enough money.” (Aaron, Pittsburg)

Figure 2. Images of People



Source: NPH Brochure: “Let’s Talk About Contemporary Affordable Housing: Who, What, How & Why?”

The San Leandro participants so liked these human images that they wondered why they were on the second page, and thought that perhaps they should go on the front: “[Place] the image focus on the people you’re trying to help, rather than things you’re trying to build.” (Natasha); “People will be drawn to [the brochure] whether or not they know this is affordable housing, or about the developments. I think it kinda makes it more personal.” (Kim). Martha from San Leandro also suggested that the concept of “people below median income,” mentioned in the same brochure, could be illustrated in some way (professions, salaries, etc.), to make them more personal and relatable. Finally, though there were few personal stories in the tools, those that did exist got a strong reaction.

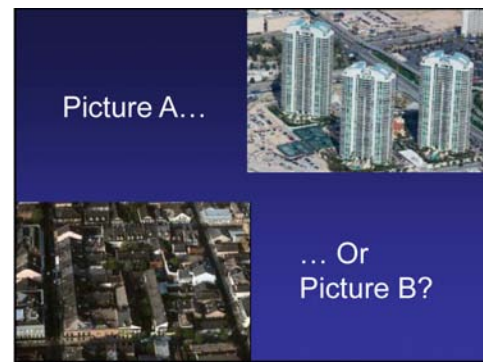
*Attractive Buildings, Design, and Landscaping  
“I mean, which one would I rather see a mile from my house?”*

The literature suggests that using carefully selected imagery can be a powerful technique to change attitudes about development, and this proved to be the case for many focus group members. A perception exists among builders and developers, for example, that people prefer low-density development. However, a study done at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill concluded that, when given visual surveys rather than conventional opinion surveys, the public prefers development that would be classified as “high density”.<sup>14</sup> Images of attractive buildings that happened to be affordable and/or high-density developments helped people to visualize something inoffensive, or even attractive, in their neighborhoods. As Pete from Pittsburg said, given a choice of two housing images of very different character: “I mean, which one would I rather see a mile from my house, it would definitely be the one on the left!” (See Figure 3). As with the humanizing and personalizing element, this is again consistent with what is predicted by the literature.

A number of favorite attractive buildings emerged, with enthusiastic comments such as: “I liked the architecture, and I think that is one of the major concerns that people do have when a new development is coming in, is what will it look like? Will it be a big square box?” (Sierra, San Leandro). These favorite developments, all of them affordable housing except Santana Row, can be seen in Figure 4.

In addition, focus group members were drawn to buildings with particular characteristics. Chief amongst these was appropriate context. Focus group members liked buildings that appeared to fit well within the building’s local context, as demonstrated by Greg from San Leandro: “[The Turk/ Jones building] is definitely my favorite of all of them. It’s in the character of the surrounding houses, you don’t know

**Figure 3. Pictures Make an Impact**



Source: GCC “How Dense Are You?” Quiz

whether it’s million dollar condos or whatever. . . I mean, you could walk by it and not have any idea whether it was affordable or market rate or anything.”

The favorite buildings also varied by the local context of the focus group members. Notably, all but one of the favorite images listed above are buildings in the Bay Area. Participants in suburban Pittsburg responded strongest to the images that looked more home-like, and particularly liked family-friendly images, with courtyards and playgrounds. Those in urban Chinatown Oakland, on the other hand, responded to denser midrise buildings with an urban character, and displayed a nuanced sensitivity to the heights that different buildings should have in different parts of their neighborhood.

The participants from both semi-urban inner-ring suburbs (San Leandro and Diridon) liked buildings with lively, activated street-fronts on the outside, such as the Turk/ Jones building, and Santana Row: “My dream for San Leandro is to have this kind of urban life, experience,” (Maureen, San Leandro). Participants from all of the focus groups liked buildings with community facilities on the inside: “Lovely, it has green space and a little courtyard,” (Julie, Diridon); “I liked that one where they had the enclosed area where the kids could play, without having to worry, you know, where they are and stuff like that,” (Mike, Pittsburg). Even though it is a high-rise, the Turk/ Jones building prompted San Leandro participants to remark that this building looked community-oriented because of design details such as its balconies and playground.

Such images helped to reshape participants’ ideas about both density:

“If you could have something like that [lower rise image], rather than block my view with three huge towers, you won! I’m in!” – Pete, Pittsburg

and affordable housing:



“That’s a very handsome-looking building, I would have thought that it wouldn’t have been affordable.” – Priscilla, Pittsburg

“Yeah, it’s kind of stereotype busting, because you usually think of affordable housing as run-down and not very attractive, and these are very nice looking.” – Jane, Pittsburg

Evidence from the literature strongly suggests that good design can facilitate TOD acceptance by the community. Studies have found that a group of people will form positive or negative attitudes toward the people living in viewed homes and neighborhoods based solely upon the appearance of the homes and neighborhoods. While it can require considerable expenditure, the addition of greenery will provide many benefits, long into the future of a neighborhood.<sup>15</sup> These include increased marketability and financial return, as landscaping can add as much as fifteen percent to the resale value of a home. Adding in trees and greenery can help make the area near a transit station safer and more pleasant. While design is not a panacea for all the concerns of NIMBYs, it can go a long way towards making a project acceptable to a community.

A good deal of focus group commentary focused on how to improve visuals employed in community settings. Many participants wanted to see more in the pictures:

more views of the building and its landscaping. Some wanted to see floor plans or interiors so they could imagine the quality of the development and be comforted that their new neighbors will be responsible and active community members. Participants also found the images to be at inappropriate scales, and felt that they could not get a good enough sense of the development in question due to pictures that were taken from a great distance or from too close in. In general when using images in tools, the following guidelines are useful: tailor images to the appropriate context, using local images if possible. Any interior amenities should be stressed, as well as pleasant design features such as balconies, terraces, awnings, trees, and cafes. Images should include people, as abandoned buildings seem intimidating and lonely. Include floor plans where possible. See Figure 5 for an example of an image that has been transformed along these lines.

**Figure 4. Attractive Housing Images: (a) Brochure Images; (b) 201 Turk and 111 Jones, San Francisco; (c) Open Doors, Los Gatos; (d) Hismen His-nu Terrace, Oakland; (e) Santana Row, San Jose**



Source: (a) NPH Brochure: “Let’s Talk About Affordable Housing: Who, What, How & Why?” (b) & (c) Great Communities Collaborative “How Dense Are You?” Quiz (d) Modified Dialing Up and Dialing Down quiz with images from Design Advisor (<http://www.designadvisor.org/>) (e) CTOD Presentation: “TOD 101”

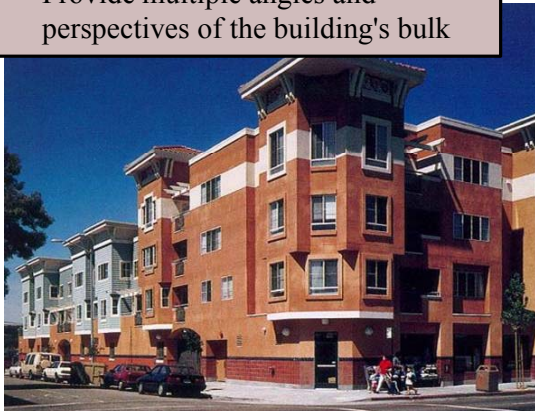
Figure 5. Suggestions for Improving Imagery

Before:



After:

Provide multiple angles and perspectives of the building's bulk

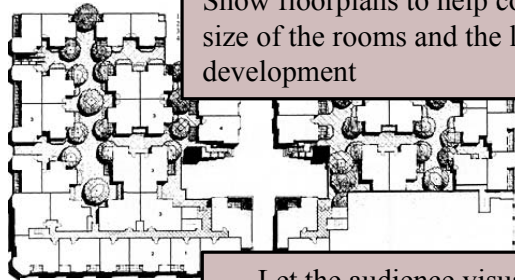


Show how the building interacts at the street level: retail? Awnings? Tree planting?



Emphasize design features such as balconies and courtyards; show kids!

Show floorplans to help convey the size of the rooms and the layout of the development



Let the audience visualize the interiors as well as the exterior





Illustrate the amenities included and how the public space functions – does it foster community?





## Figure 6. Geographic Comparison: Retail is a Community Benefit

Development at a transit station versus development away from transit:

	
<b>Pleasant Hill Transit Village</b>	<b>Northwest Pacific Plan, San Ramon</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 1,200 new homes</li> <li>▪ 700,000 square feet of retail</li> <li>▪ 1.3 million square feet of Offices</li> <li>▪ 140 acres</li> <li>▪ Next to Pleasant Hill BART</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 830 new homes</li> <li>▪ no shops</li> <li>▪ no offices</li> <li>▪ 290 acres</li> <li>▪ 9 miles to the nearest BART</li> </ul>

Source: GCC "Traffic-Lite" Brochure

### Community Benefits "What's in it for them?"

The community benefits that can accompany TOD were not a major emphasis of the tools that we tested, but where they were mentioned, they were very popular, especially amongst participants in Diridon, who had had some frustrating experiences with transit and TOD planning. The biggest response was to community benefits in the form of public goods like parks, open space, and public art.<sup>16</sup>

For example, one slide of the TOD 101 presentation from Reconnecting America says the following:

#### *Parking Impacts:*

*Reduction in parking space can provide land for playgrounds, child care centers, parks, or other open space; surface level parking reduces opportunity for community/green space.*

In response, Celia from Diridon remarked: "I would LOVE to see that as a requirement for TODs! I mean, if they're gonna take away parking, they should give it back to the communities as parks, instead of making it higher, or adding more units." Sharon, also from Diridon, said: "Land and resources invested in parking could be used for wider sidewalks, trees, and public art. That would be so great. This is what we need to get them to adopt!" Though community benefits were not even discussed in the Lake Merritt tools, those participants were also strongly drawn to images with open space as an attractive accompaniment to new dense development, even when they did not like the buildings in the pictures, or found them inappropriate to the setting.

The other community benefit that most respondents liked was retail. The notable exception was Pittsburg, the most suburban of the groups, which did not comment on retail at all. For the other groups though, walkable retail was

seen as both a convenience and as a part of place-making and community-making: "All-residential buildings don't have any more community than suburban neighborhoods without retail to bring out the community, the people" (Sheila, San Leandro); "7000 square feet of retail is pretty awesome, that's nice. We need jobs more than we need housing, that sounds right. Mom and Pop mixed in with the other retail, see that was well thought out" (Sam, Diridon, in response to GCC brochure "Traffic-Lite"; see Figure 6). Respondents really liked the pictures of the attractive retail in Santana Row. However, the Diridon participants were skeptical that such a nice development would result in *their* neighborhood, so it is important that images be realistic, as well as attractive.

Conversely, focus group members consistently pointed out when tools did not pay enough attention to community benefits. They would have liked to hear a story of how new development will contribute to the overall betterment of the existing community life and built environment. While the tools discussed in a general fashion that TOD can generate positive economic benefits or greater safety or open space amenities, no tool really attempted to envision how the neighborhood would evolve as a result of the new development.

"You talk a lot about community here...but we never really got a real sense of the community we're trying to build here. We don't just want some parking lots. You're trying to get all these apartments around something, and kids can play with other kids. You want to emphasize the

nature of these developments as contributing to community" -- Megan in response to a TOD 101 presentation in Diridon

Platitudes such as "Reduced parking ratios can provide the opportunity for greater open space" – though often true – are not as convincing as showing communities where a new park will be built (or a new day care or playground). Compensating affected residents for the perceived burdens of accepting new infill housing will strike them as more equitable and fair; as Amy said: "What about the existing communities? Does this project bring benefits to the community? . . . if people will live there, how does it contribute to the other residents, what's in it for them?"

Experts have recommended that developers stress that they are creating a place for the whole community – turning the station area into a place with sense of identity and a desirable destination.<sup>17</sup> More precisely, developers should enumerate what a new project will add to the wider community in tangible amenities (open space, revenues, customers, and pedestrian streets) and intangible benefits (diversity, safety by changing the quality of the station, revitalization



## Figure 7. Pragmatic Tradeoff

### WHY Do Communities Need More Contemporary Affordable Housing?

- When people live near work, they reduce commute time thereby reducing regional traffic and air pollution. They also have more time to spend with their families and communities.

Source: NPH Brochure: “Let’s Talk About Affordable Housing: Who, What, How & Why?”

## Figure 8. Testimonial



### Alice Slaughter - Resident of Metro Walk, Richmond, CA:

Living next to BART saves a lot of money on gas and transportation. There’s less wear and tear on our car and it’s simply less stressful than driving through heavy traffic, not knowing if I will get to work on time. I take BART everyday to downtown Oakland. Without BART as a viable transportation option I would have paid \$10 per day just for parking, in addition to sitting in traffic, battling traffic, and being stressed out when I got there. Being able to live within walking distance to BART allows me to begin and end almost everyday with a relaxing BART ride.

Source: Great Communities Collaborative Brochure: “Traffic-Lite”

of “Main Street”, adding to identity). Simply put, “Density plus amenity equals community; density without amenity equals crowding.”<sup>18</sup>

To address some of these grievances, future tools should tell the story of a better community. This concern came up most frequently in communities where a specific proposal was already on the table and meetings/hearings had already been held. Tools can help residents recognize that new development may be a valuable opportunity to upgrade the public realm. Developers can engage the community members in a discussion over what amenities are missing and what they would like to see added. The difficulty lies in the fact that the benefits of development in the form of jobs, real estate tax revenue, or housing production are diffuse and general, but the impacts are specific and local.<sup>19</sup> Rarely do experts discuss specific benefits for existing communities. Bridging this divide is at heart of many NIMBY disputes.

In addition to the specific elements in the tools that resonated with our focus group members, a number of presentation techniques were very effective at promoting trust and credibility. These techniques will be explored below.

### Concrete Examples

*“These are practical things that people can relate to”*

Focus group members found concrete examples useful and relatable—and the more local, or the more relatable, the better. The images of people, buildings, and communities with attractive amenities are some of the most effective concrete examples from the tools we tested. Several of the brochures contained concrete, relatable examples such as pragmatic tradeoffs (see Figure 7), testimonials (see Figure 8), or geographic comparisons (refer back to Figure 6) that drew approving responses from respondents. For example, the first of these prompted Layla from San Leandro to say: “the last part, pollution and commutes....these are practical things that people can relate to. Some of these points don’t necessarily get at the self interest...but this one does point right to people’s self interest. The other things, its more ‘it’s the right thing to do.’” And Linda from Diridon appreciated the above testimonial: “I like the quote from the transit user. They’ve got a car, they’re making choices, it’s not like they’re transit-dependent, but it’s a choice to make their life easier.” In each case, the example worked because it was concrete, and it represented, people, images or problems that were familiar to the particular people in that group. Most were also accompanied by attractive images that reinforced both their concreteness and their relatability.

Making vague, abstract claims without substantiation renders the facts suspect. Anna captured the conclusion perfectly: “Better yet, use examples ... Because I think, right there, people are suspicious, they’re gonna look at that first one and immediately be skeptical of the presentation.” Experts no longer have a monopoly over information, since the Internet makes scholarly research and real-world experiential data readily available to the public.

## Figure 9. Box of References Builds Credibility

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

*The Online Guide to State and Local Housing Policy*, Center for Housing Policy:

[www.housingpolicy.org](http://www.housingpolicy.org)

*Myths and Facts About Affordable and High-Density Housing*, California Planning Roundtable & California Department of Housing and Community Development:

[www.hcd.ca.gov/hpd/mythsnfacts.pdf](http://www.hcd.ca.gov/hpd/mythsnfacts.pdf)

*Busting the Five Myths of Affordable Housing*, The Campaign for Affordable Housing:

[www.tcah.org/pdf/5Myths.pps](http://www.tcah.org/pdf/5Myths.pps)

Source: NPH Brochure: "Let's Talk About Contemporary Affordable Housing: Who, What, How & Why?"

### *Transparency, Professionalism and Straightforward Information* *"Here, you're gonna get a little skepticism..."*

Trust and credibility are highlighted in the persuasion literature as some of the most important foundations of persuasive community engagement.<sup>20</sup> Across all of our focus groups, we found that transparency was one of the best ways of building both. The tools were more effective when they provided data, studies, and other supporting information in support of TOD and its components, so long as the data were used and presented in ways that were credible, and in a context that was meaningful to the participants. Though the data or studies in the tools alone may not have been enough to convince most of our focus group members, they were sure to notice when data was not provided, or when claims were given but not properly substantiated.

Participants were consistently frustrated by instances where assertions were offered without evidence. They were particularly frustrated with the myth-fact pairs from *Myths and Facts About Affordable Housing* that gave no citations or numbers in support of their claims. "I think any time you have something that says 'fact,' you need to put up a source so people can look it up, and who did and interpreted the study," said Katie from San Leandro. "This is a broad-brush statement, and I say, prove it!" said John from San Leandro. Alexis felt that unbacked assertions were manipulative:

"There's a conflict here, between whether you're trying to PROVE something...or if you're just giving people all the information and letting them decide for themselves. The sound-bite nature of it might make people feel hoodwinked, you need to give people more information and let them make up their own minds."

Focus group members were likewise very appreciative when they were presented with tools that gave clear citations of their sources, and other similar information. Transparency, often linked with professionalism, tended to improve participants' respect for and trust in a tool overall.

For example, the groups were particularly impressed by the transparency and professionalism of the brochures, and generally found them to be the most credible of all of the tools. The box of references found on the front page of the "Who, What, How & Why?" brochure (see Figure 9) may have been the single most popular element out of all of the tools: "I like the fact that there's references here for further information. There's links here at the bottom of the page. I think that's a big part of it, that's something I liked." (Randy, Pittsburg). "First you can see the box with the references, nice to have those right there, when you look at it," (Nora, San Leandro).<sup>21</sup>


Indeed, many participants welcomed the chance to learn more about TOD in the context of these brochures that they found to be both transparent and professional. Some reactions to the brochures include the following:

"I thought it was pretty good. The whole thing about the seniors, senior households have 30% fewer cars, I didn't know it was that dramatic. I was familiar with the fact that they drove less but I wouldn't have known specifically." – Cory, Diridon

"I liked everything, it had a lot of information on there, you could see what sites to go to, check the website if you want further information." – Don, Pittsburg

Not every focus group member found information on the brochures believable, and it was specifically those with the

**Figure 10. A Myth-Fact Pair With Greater Specificity and Cited Source**

<p><i>Before</i></p> <p><b>Myth:</b> High density and affordable housing will cause too much traffic.</p> <p><b>Fact:</b> People who live in affordable housing own fewer cars and drive less.</p>	 <p>From NIMBY to YIMBY, Ca HCD</p>
<p><i>After</i></p> <p><b>Myth:</b> High density and affordable housing will cause too much traffic.</p> <p><b>Fact:</b> "Analysis of past housing developments in the East Bay similar to one proposed for your neighborhood have demonstrated that residents own 33% fewer cars and drive 47% fewer miles than standard suburban developments" - Ohland and Poticha 2006</p>	

most unpleasant personal experiences with planning and development processes that were most skeptical. However, the majority of people responded positively to these types of facts in the brochures. In contrast, when similar assertions appeared without citations or other support in some of the presentations, the groups were much more skeptical. See Figure 10 for an example of a myth-fact pair that has been improved with better citation and specificity.

Finally, more definitions were needed in the tools. Every focus group had several instances in which participants asked the researchers for further information, and in particular for definitions of affordable housing, density, and related terms. For example, in Lake Merritt Jolee asked, "Each developer, do they choose . . . is everything that is affordable housing for low income or medium-income people, or is it only part of, only a few units in that apartment building that's affordable?" This points to the need either for the tools themselves to contain definitions of key terms, or for the facilitators to define terms before or as they appear, and to be alert for concepts that their audience may be unfamiliar with.

### *Keeping the Local Context in Mind* "This is car town."

One of the most consistent findings of these focus groups was that tools not attuned to the community where they are being used will not reach that audience. Time and again, tools were criticized for not being tailor-made for the neighborhood where they were shown. The essential lesson is to avoid tools not explicitly designed for the density, built environment, urban/suburban context, and particularities of a community. If the audience is not familiar and comfortable with the frame of reference being presented to them, they will perceive presenters as outsiders, unsympathetic to the needs of the community.

With no emotional connection, the tools don't resonate with their own personal experiences.

For example, in reaction to a quiz shown in Pittsburg entitled "How Dense Are You?," which asked participants to rank several images of housing units from around the Bay Area in terms of density, respondents felt awkward guessing and debating the density of random developments from locations dissimilar to their own surroundings. Pittsburg is a suburban collection of subdivisions punctuated by strip malls and freeways, and housing projects with fairly high dwelling units per acre from more urban settings did not strike them as relevant or appropriate for their community. Instead, they would have liked to have a conversation about how a new dense project could be designed to be integrated into the Pittsburg milieu – how could density be tailored to suit them? Rather than discuss courtyard midrises, for example, they might have been prepared to imagine duplexes or townhomes down the block from their home. Focusing the attention away from their home territory suggested to them that we were not aware or sensitive to the particular qualities of their neighborhood, and made it more difficult for them to relate to the materials being viewed.

Statistics, studies and models used in the tools should also be as local as possible. We found that when these statistics relied on national averages or models, focus group members were more easily able to discount the information. As in the discussion regarding local context, factual information should be framed with a specific community in mind. Having locally relevant facts is the only way to penetrate the strongest resistance. Relying on general statistical trends ("demographically, the housing market has moved on from exclusively providing for families with children") or statewide averages ("California has the nation's worst traffic") doesn't convince those who believe their district is unique and special.

One of the presentations made the following claim: "In a national survey 6 out of 10 prospective homebuyers chose a higher density, mixed use community." Alesia from Diridon reacted to this by saying, "There aren't any young people that I've been helping for twenty years who want to live near high density. At all. So, the national figures must be somewhere else. I don't see it." The claim contradicted her own perceptions, and she was able to easily dismiss it as a national, not local statistic that did not apply in her community. This type of reaction happened frequently in the focus groups. Here are some other examples:

"One issue is that it would be good to specify what area median income means for different places over the Bay area." - Jeff, San Leandro

"Um, people who live in developments that are affordable housing drive less and create less traffic, I don't think that is true in San Jose all the time."  
- Diana, Diridon



Though it is not always possible to use local statistics, where it is possible, local, or at least regional statistics may be more convincing to communities.

Tools should also be tailored to the particular concerns of a given community. Some Pittsburg focus group participants were frustrated by tools that focused mostly on the design aspects of density and affordable housing. While design was important to them, they felt that this didn't address the most pressing concerns that neighborhood residents shared. As Trevor finally said in frustration: "So I think it's not just a matter of dwelling units or density, it's a matter that we live in suburbia. And if you're gonna put a whole lot of people there, then there's more than just how many people per acre are there, it's, you know, what about everything else?" In focusing on density, he felt that we were ignoring the most important and legitimate concerns of the neighborhood, and he didn't feel heard. Similar frustrations came up in other focus groups, where major neighborhood concerns, such as school overcrowding, were not addressed in the tools.

### *The Perils of Surprise and Misdirection* *"Why don't you just tell us the truth?"*

Some of the tools that we tested tried to use surprise as a tactic to challenge people's preconceived notions about density, TOD or affordable housing. For example, the quiz activity would ask questions that played into people's expectations, and then give a surprising answer that subverted expectations. An example can be seen in Figure 11. This approach was meant to emphasize that design is the critical component in making dense or affordable housing fit with neighborhood character. Instead, people were left feeling manipulated and condescended to by activities that had a "gotcha!" moment of this kind, which produced some strong negative reactions. Laurel from Pittsburg found the "surprising" aspects of the quiz to be simply deceptive, and said the following:

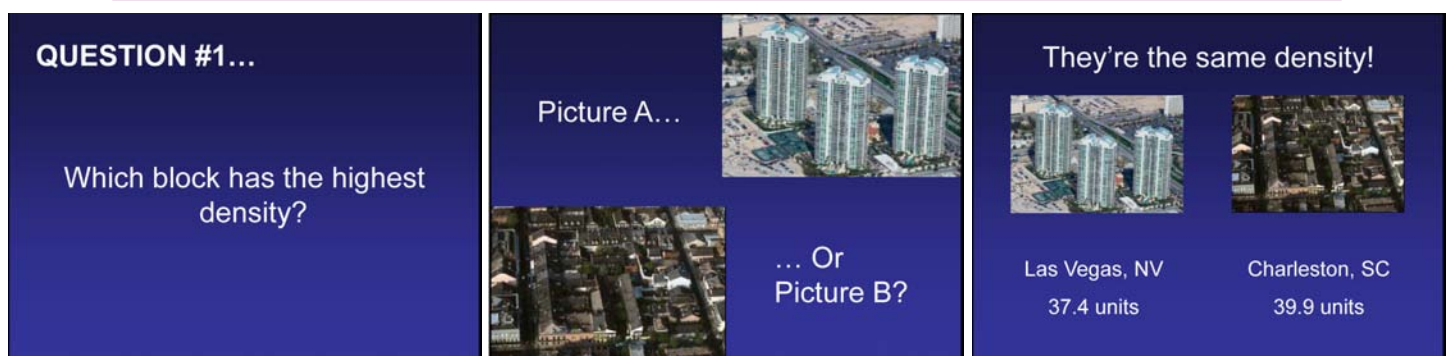
"Well, if your issue is, are the pictures promoting dialogue, well to me, it would be, you know, is it promoting useful dialogue. Is it really going to give you any information. You know when you put pictures up that are deceptive, I think that that takes you away from meaningful dialogue, because I think then all you get are people arguing and complaining about how come those things are deceptive, why don't you just tell us the truth?"

Overall, we found that surprise was not an effective strategy to use in an educational setting, and only served as a diversion that changed the subject away from a substantive discussion, and made the participants suspicious of facilitator intentions.

Interestingly, there was one exception to this rule. The Lake Merritt group really liked the "How Dense Are You" quiz, despite the manipulative elements and shortage of citations. But rather than focusing on whether or not they got the answers right, this group used the quiz as a learning opportunity, asking a great many questions about each topic as it was raised. They looked to the focus group facilitators, rather than the presentation itself, as a source of trustworthy information.<sup>22</sup> Most of the participants found this process on the whole to be a satisfactory experience, and said at the end that they felt that they had a much better grasp of these issues than they had had previously, even though they had been to community presentations before. This points to the possibility that activities like the quiz could be used effectively if they were changed from a quiz format to a format in which the surprising images and facts it contains are simply presented as points for discussion, without trying to go for the effect of surprising or astonishing anyone.

In San Leandro, we tested a new tool that would get to the same messages about the importance of design, community context, and the fact that good design is possible, even at higher densities. We found a collection of "good" and "bad" examples of affordable housing, using Design

**Figure 11. Using Surprise as a Tactic Leaves Some Participants Feeling Manipulated**



Source: Great Communities Collaborative "How Dense Are You?" Quiz

Advisor as well as images from Google StreetView to project onto a screen.<sup>23</sup> All of the examples were local to the Bay Area, and some to San Leandro itself. See Figure 12 for examples. We asked the focus group members to discuss what they did and did not like about each building. This allowed focus group members to contribute their own knowledge and opinions to the discussion, and moved the discussion away from density and units, and toward design, community character, and even emotional reactions to the buildings. Rather than putting participants on the defensive, the images generated a productive dialogue that achieved many of the same goals.

*Dialogue with other Focus Group Members*  
*"I think that's a good point she's got . . ."*

Finally, it is important to note that there were some interesting and instructive dynamics that came from the focus group dialogue itself, independent of the tools. Some of the most powerfully persuasive moments came from this dialogue.

Though different participants in a single group often had different viewpoints, they were all insiders and clearly respected each other (most were strangers prior to the group), and the most profound "aha!" moments happened when participants themselves challenged the preconceived notions of others. For example, the following myth and fact from the NIMBY to YIMBY presentation were presented to the San Leandro group:

**Myth: High density and affordable housing increase crime.**

**Fact: Design and use of space has a far more significant effect on crime than density or income levels ("eyes on the street").**

The group was initially highly skeptical of this unsubstantiated claim, and began to take issue with it. Then Rob spoke up and said,

"So let me give you a couple reasons why I think this fact is true . . . The affordable housing managers will screen all the potential applicants, number two...these developments always have a backlog of applicants waiting to get in, so if there's a problem with a resident, they will be out of there and replaced. On the other hand, for market rate apartments, the managers' obligations is to keep the place full...so if there's a troublesome person, they're much more likely to keep those tenants unless they know they can fill that room immediately."

Group members nodded as Rob spoke, and the conversation took an entirely different turn. Instead of debating the validity of this "fact", they began to debate only the problems they saw in the way it was presented—the reasons that it would come off as incredible, even if there is truth to it.

Perhaps more powerfully, one Pittsburg participant expressed, early in the group session, some common negative stereotypes about Section 8 and the occupants of affordable housing.<sup>24</sup> Later, another group member mentioned that she herself had lived in affordable housing at one time. She and the first gentleman got into a brief discussion about Section 8 and affordable housing. When confronted with this individual that did *not* fit his preconceived notions, and who did not back away from the topic, the gentleman transitioned from espousing classic stereotypes to making an apparent attempt to understand and change his mind: "You've probably had more experience than me [with affordable housing and its residents] . . . I think that's a good point she's got . . . if people don't have enough room, you know, to have their

**Figure 12. Alternative to Density Quiz**





own bedrooms, or kitchen or living room, it would make it hard to live.” The woman in this group did what so much of the literature suggests, humanize affordable housing residents, better than had any of the tools.

All of this confirms the view discussed in the literature, that persuasion and consensus-building are produced through a process of building shared meaning through group dialogue, rather than on having a good argument.<sup>25</sup> In fact, through dialogue, focus group members even managed to do some of the things that are recommended in the TOD persuasion literature, but that were not found in the tools.

### **Established or Reputable Stakeholders and Developers**

The literature cites the usefulness of bringing established or reputable stakeholders and/or developers to talk to communities on the behalf of a plan or development.<sup>26</sup> This was not represented in our more generally-focused set of tools, but it did come up at the San Leandro focus group. When group members were expressing skepticism about how well affordable or high density housing would be maintained over time in response to one of the myth-fact pairs, Robin, one of the participants, stepped in and started talking about BRIDGE, the affordable housing nonprofit that is developing The Crossings: “I think that people know that BRIDGE has a really good reputation for keeping up their developments.” Collin added, “I do know BRIDGE is excellent, and I don’t personally think that Crossings will add crime, not at all.” These remarks were followed by many nodding heads confirming that, where possible, community engagement tools should use trusted names and developers.

### **Reframing TOD**

Finally, several researchers in the TOD NIMBY literature have advocated working, not to refute TOD myths per se, but to reframe the issues and tell a different story about them entirely.<sup>27</sup> The tools that we tested, in general, did not make strong attempts to do this. But in the San Leandro group, participants themselves did so on several occasions. Notably, each of these instances of reframing discussed TOD in a way that was centered on people and their needs, and on the community itself. The insider status of these participants gave them more legitimacy than we the facilitators as outsiders could have had.

For example, the following myth-fact pair that we earlier was, like most, met with skepticism by the group:

**Myth: High density and affordable housing will cause too much traffic.**

**Fact: People who live in affordable housing own fewer cars and drive less.**

The tenor of the discussion was that, if more and more families are moving in, they’re going to have *some* cars, so the overall number will probably still go up. Then Lauren suggested that, “Here’s the thing. In a lot of these developments, the people that move into them are *from* the community already, so you’re subtracting cars from San Leandro. The community is benefiting from drawing its own residents into transit development.” Don replied: “That’s a good point, a very good point.”

Later, when another myth-fact pair prompted group concerns about dense neighborhoods and overcrowded schools, participant Maria stepped in and said that, “in San Leandro there are families that are doubling and tripling up in apartments, and they already live in the community. So we’re hoping that these families will have an opportunity to move into the new units.”

A few moments later Marion added:

“It’s good to bring up the point that no matter what, people will be coming in, the city is already going to grow this much, people don’t always realize that . . . The community will be growing, there will be 10 or 15% growth . . . so the question is, how are we going to address this, rather than we’re going to force 3000 units into the city just to bring more people in.”

In each case, these comments altered the tenor of the conversation, as participants mulled over these perspectives that were to them more legitimate than the unsubstantiated “myths” and “facts” on the screen. Critically, each of these new perspectives was specifically applicable to their own community, and credible, since they came from someone in the community.

These observations support the notion from the persuasion literature that information is only added to the group’s shared understanding as it is deliberated by the group. It points to the idea of using discussion, and particularly discussion with known supporters who are still insiders in the communities, as tools themselves. It also points incorporating newly-framed and powerful stories about TOD that are appropriate and recognizable for the particular community into the tools directly. This is a difficult and highly subjective task, and one that would often have to rely on information from supportive local organizations or individuals.

## *Putting it Together*

In the literature on community opposition and persuasion for TOD there is an ongoing debate over whether it is stories, testimonials, and careful framing, or facts, data, and studies, that are most effective as persuasion tactics in a TOD planning context.<sup>28</sup> In our research, we found that, when done openly, honestly, credibly, and with respect for the audience, all of these things could be effective for different people and in different contexts. We also found that these approaches tend to support and reinforce each other. For example, our groups responded strongly to concrete examples such as testimonials and stories, but were at the same time highly critical of any information that came without data and citations. They really liked learning more about the topic, but only when they found the source trustworthy; trustworthiness was typically established through a combination of transparency and professionalism. What's more, it is doubtful that testimonials or facts, even specific and well-cited, would have carried anywhere near the same impact if they had been presented without attractive, context-appropriate images.

These factors depend on the audience in question. In our focus groups, most participants happily responded to opportunities for getting information that they saw as legitimate and locally applicable. However, the individuals that had had the most frustrating personal experiences with TOD and development processes were the least persuaded by facts and numbers, and constantly questioned them no matter how well backed up. For these individuals, the reframing and storytelling/meaning-making approaches (i.e. "TOD can benefit you and your community, here's how"; or "there are already over-crowded people in your community that will benefit from TOD") seemed to go further.

What this does mean, above all, is that it is important to keep the context in mind and to know your audience, a theme that has laced through all of our findings. This applies to overall approach, as well as the details of the examples used, i.e. the architectural style, amenities and benefits. Suburban groups are likely to respond to suburban buildings, and urban groups urban buildings. In our groups, we found that a suburban neighborhood was not interested in retail, while inner-suburban residents were; the most urban and the most suburban focus groups seemed more interested in open space. The underlying message is to use and combine each of these approaches judiciously, while making them all as personalized, relatable, immediate, concrete, visual, cited and/or otherwise transparent as possible.

## Concluding Thoughts

Several messages emerged from the focus group process, namely: 1) foster trust & credibility, 2) humanize the message, and 3) respect community reality. As we found in the literature, trust and credibility are paramount to getting a message through to any audience, but particularly so when so much is at stake. Being conscious of the local context at all times will help tailor new developments to existing communities. Building up trust means avoiding deception and manipulation in favor of straightforward education. Being rigorous and thorough in your factual methodology will further strengthen planners' credibility as authorities.

Whenever possible, persuasive tools should humanize the message by using real people and their stories. This includes picturing children and families, and drawing upon concrete examples and quotes from the folks who will potentially be living in a new housing project. Humanizing also extends to employing attractive and sophisticated imagery of both people and buildings. It is also preferable to frame new projects in terms of the neighborhood instead of a "TOD;" for example, using Chinatown as the local construct instead of the Lake Merritt BART station.

While the existing literature reveals sophisticated understanding of how to build community support for TOD, many tools did not follow the advice of the experts. Several missing elements were identified that would significantly improve the efficacy of these tools. In response to the issues associated with added density, the tools failed to address what would be done with the added costs on public infrastructure, especially schools and services. Starting a conversation about the growth that will inevitably occur and poor living conditions many current residents already face may be a strategy to help opponents recognize that new developments will serve community needs now and in the future.

The tools also failed to tell a concrete story about the community and use local statistics. Residents are aware of the trade-offs between density and open space - but in reality, many communities don't get high class amenities out of new developments but are stuck with the inconveniences and added burdens. Developers and planners should be honest about unsuccessful developments and have an earnest conversation about how designs could be improved in the future.

Imagery from the tools could also be enhanced in a number of ways. To have an effective conversation around design, residents would like to be given a fuller visual set of information, including the size of the units, the quality of the interiors, and the streetscape and other amenities. Most of these details were lacking in the standard design tools and literature. It is worth pursuing in future research

whether photographic simulations of 'before and after' developments are persuasive or viewed with skepticism.

On the whole, while tools such as those studied here are vital to better communication (and they can certainly be improved), in order to really reach a community, establishing genuine personal relationships and trust will be essential. Practitioners should endeavor to respect community reality and truly cultivate honest communication with local leaders. Residents should feel that they have something to offer to the process other than just outright refusal or unconditional acceptance. Operating on the basis of mutuality will make for a healthier rapport between sides and will provide more opportunities for education.

A lesson from the focus groups illustrates this perfectly; dialogue itself in many cases seemed more effective than any tool or image. The process *itself* of gathering in a neutral setting to discuss a controversial proposal brought the sides closer together. By incorporating techniques learned through community organizing, planners can engage the community on a more equal footing and entice more supporters to join the conversation. Going further, planners can use the tools and the process to educate residents about community needs they themselves were not aware of. Tools might portray new development in terms of how the affected community will benefit from growth. In each case, we should ask, how does this new development align with the aspirations of the existing residents?

# Notes

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- 20 Allen 2002; Field 1998; Housing Assistance Council 1994; Iglesias 2002; Inhaber 1998; Koebel et al. 2004; National Low Income Housing Coalition 2001.
- 21 Ronald from San Leandro also liked the boxes, but suggested the addition of addresses or phone numbers, for those without internet access.
- 22 This only worked because they found us trustworthy. In our case, it may have been because we worked closely with an organization that they are all a part of, Asian Pacific Environmental Network, in order to set up the focus group.
- 23 <http://www.designadvisor.org/>
- 24 Section 8 is a US Department of Housing and Urban Development program that provides affordable housing for low-income people through both vouchers and government-built housing projects.
- 25 Booher and Innes 2002; Innes 1998.
- 26 Goodno 2005; National Low Income Housing Coalition 2001; Iglesias 2002.
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# Appendices

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## Appendix A: Focus Group Site Descriptions

### *Pittsburg*

Pittsburg, CA is a small, outer ring suburb and bedroom community located about 40 miles from San Francisco. The Pittsburg/Bay Point BART station, currently the line terminus, is located on the western edge of Pittsburg where it meets unincorporated Bay Point. The surrounding neighborhood from which we drew our focus group participants includes a few older Bay Point neighborhoods comprised of apartments and single-family homes; extensive new suburban subdivisions of single-family homes that have been continually growing since the early 1990s in Pittsburg; and a small auto-oriented shopping center.

Pittsburg is in general considered “pro-development,” and most of its development up until now has been in the form of auto-oriented, suburban subdivisions on the abundant undeveloped land in the city. However, there have been local disputes about particular developments and plans related to concerns about environmental impacts and arguments about density, and undergirded by political controversy and perceived conflicts of interest on the part of several former Pittsburg Planning Commission members. One of these disputes led to the collapse of a previous TOD planning process for the Pittsburg/Bay Point station area. The County of Contra Costa adopted a plan for the unincorporated Bay Point portions of the station area in 2002, but Pittsburg never voted on the issue, which stalled in part due to objections by the owner of Pittsburg’s portion of the station-area land. The county has begun the early stages of implementing its plan in county-owned land, while the Pittsburg portion of the plan remained stalled for several years.

The City of Pittsburg is currently in the early stages of two TOD planning processes. The first is revival of the failed station-area planning process the city’s portion of the Pittsburg/Bay Point TOD planning area, and is the focus area for our research. Through this plan the City hopes to create greater connectivity between BART, the Oak Hills Shopping Center, and the neighboring and planned subdivisions; and to create denser, mixed-use areas with housing, retail and office. Pittsburg is also in the early stages of planning a station area for the future eBART station in downtown Pittsburg at Railroad Avenue. Together, these two projects mark a new orientation toward smart growth by the city.

The neighborhood that will be most impacted by the station area plan is Pittsburg’s Oak Hills neighborhood, which is composed primarily of single-family subdivisions alongside a few apartment buildings, and extends outward from the edge of the BART parking lot. Most of the focus group participants were drawn from this neighborhood. The Oak Hills neighborhood is predominantly white and

Asian, with incomes higher than the average for Pittsburg and for Contra Costa County. Housing values are high for Pittsburg, and about 1/3 of residents pay more than 30% of their income for housing expenses. Fifteen percent of neighborhood residents are transit-users, significantly higher than the average for Pittsburg.<sup>1</sup>

Pittsburg planners anticipate some resistance to the station area plan from the community, primarily over blocked views and increased traffic. The neighborhood has strong political representation, with the neighborhood association director sitting on Pittsburg’s planning commission. Another potential issue in the neighborhood is affordable housing. Housing in the neighborhood is currently higher-end, and many people knowledgeable about housing in Pittsburg have expressed concern about “concentrated” affordable housing. The city has an uneasy relationship to affordable housing due to a large number of high-profile projects in recent years, some of which are considered great successes and others deep failures.

### *Diridon*

San Jose has long been a town designed for the automobile, but a renewed focus around transit hubs is changing the story. Major residential and commercial projects are being planned in the radius around Diridon Station, but not without plenty of community pushback. The essential battle lines revolve around the preservation of existing single-family residential areas and residents’ fears that new dense multi-family development will change the character of their community for the worse. Nearby neighborhoods are affluent and stable, and residents have a strong attachment to the history and feel of their community, making them very vocal in their opinion of the development. Examining the history and planning context surrounding Diridon will help understand the fight taking place today.

Already a transit hub, Diridon is envisioned as the “Grand Central of the West.” At or near the station, a half dozen transit systems will interconnect: VTA light rail, local bus routes, ACE commuter train, Caltrain, Amtrak, a future BART extension, and the high-speed rail will all converge at the station with an estimated 1,200 trains, buses and light rail arrivals and departures per day. This convergence is unique in the Western U.S. and will rival major transportation hubs in Asia, the Eastern U.S. and Europe.

Present-day streetscape in the Station Area and along the Alameda (a major traffic connector to the station) fails ‘livable community criteria.’ Commercial retail is struggling, and access between transit stops and commercial areas is not attractive or welcoming for pedestrians or bicycles. Currently, the area does not satisfy the needs of businesses or residents but instead serves as

catchment for stadium parking and limited light industrial uses. Visitors and residents must travel out of the district for their shopping needs. There is no significant green space in the existing TOD radius except Cayhill Park and Arena Green; however the nearby Guadalupe River Park is a major recreational and ecological amenity which could be better connected to the proposed development site. Nearby are first-ring suburbs that were incorporated into the city proper in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including several affluent, majority-white communities, and two newer and less affluent communities closer to the station that are both Hispanic majority with a high share of multi-family units and overcrowding.

The community perception of recent changes is that they have not succeeded at reducing local auto-dependence of city residents or improving neighborhood quality of life. Specifically, the principal points of community opposition are centered around traffic congestion and parking overflow from new developments with reduced parking ratios, development that is insensitive to the neighborhood design context, lack of viable retail, the height of new buildings, and the lack of funds for new services/ infrastructure needed by new residents.

#### *Lake Merritt (Oakland Chinatown)*

Oakland's historic Chinatown, located on the western edge of Oakland's central business district, is a dense, populous and vibrant area, with a strong history of civic engagement and community organizing. The neighborhood is still predominantly a neighborhood of immigrants. Approximately 70% of Chinatown residents are Asian, and 61% of households are linguistically isolated, meaning that no one in the home over the age of 14 speaks English well. The residents are generally low-income, with a median household income level of \$22, 520, and education levels are low. Eighty-six percent of residents are renters.<sup>2</sup> Despite ongoing redevelopment and steady turnover of Asian immigrants as they moved first to Chinatown and later to the suburbs, Chinatown has maintained a strong identity and spirit of activism. The Lake Merritt BART station, one of three downtown Oakland BART stops, has been located in the southeast part of Chinatown since 1972.

Chinatown has a long-standing and uneasy history with development. Throughout the 50s, and 60s, Chinatown lost a lot of land through eminent domain to the City of Oakland for projects like libraries, community colleges and others. Like many other communities in Oakland, freeways were constructed through or around the neighborhood. During these two decades, Chinatown lost a total of 29 city blocks, including 20% of existing housing units and important cultural institutions. Though all of these projects had large impacts on Chinatown residents, who saw few of the project benefits, residents had been given no voice in their planning or implementation. Chinatown community and business leaders tried to organize to harness urban renewal for the benefit of Chinatown residents, but

their efforts were unsuccessful and led to frustration and distrust of planners. One of projects during this time included the clearing of three blocks for BART use, including the Lake Merritt BART station, parking lot, and BART administration building, which has left an enduring adverse impression on the community.

The relationship between the City of Oakland Planning Department and Chinatown has changed greatly over the years, to one of much greater inclusiveness and participation. Chinatown has a PAC, and boasts many active community groups. However, uneasiness and distrust remain due to the abuses of the past, especially around issues of BART and transit. Recently, bad feelings around development and redevelopment were re-kindled by a high profile struggle in which elderly, low-income residents of Chinatown's Pacific Renaissance Plaza were threatened with eviction when the affordability of the units expired. A successful lawsuit maintained the affordability of the units, but the conflict is widely known and has angered many Chinatown residents, reinforcing distrust of the City and developers. The conflict has also served to shape some very strong community organizations in recent years.

At the time of our research, the City was in the early stages of a participatory process, holding community meetings with residents to identify what it is that community members want from the station area planning process. Chinatown community groups such as Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN), Asian Health Services (AHS), and the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce have organized heavily to get a strong turnout of Chinatown residents and businesses at meetings to influence the process. It is the former group of immigrant residents from which our focus group was drawn. A community survey administered by AHS and the Great Communities Collaborative indicated that the issues most important to Chinatown residents at one planning meeting included safety, jobs and housing. Another community issue that has come up repeatedly is potential overburdening of schools with a population increase.

#### *San Leandro*

San Leandro is a first ring suburb of Oakland, settled beginning in 1850 and incorporated in 1872. During and after the Second World War, San Leandro underwent explosive population growth, the population quadrupling from 1940 to 1960. Thousands of new single family homes sprang up in the community during these decades. However, by the late 1960s, the city was largely built out, with almost no land available for development or annexation. It was an attractive escape for many of the more affluent citizens of Oakland during the 80s and 90s, seen as having the charm of suburbia with the appeal of nearby urban amenities. In 2005, to cope with an ever-growing population but a limited supply of developable land, San Leandro began a twenty month public planning

process that resulted in the Downtown San Leandro Transit Oriented Development Strategy. Funded by MTC, the planning study engaged hundreds of community members and resulted in a substantial upwards revision of the number of homes expected to be built in the downtown area. Originally slated for a paltry 500 homes, San Leandro's core is now zoned for up to 3500 new units. The plan allows for densities up to 200 units per acre and represents a tremendous breakthrough for the city in terms of supporting TOD. Although fears of density and affordable housing can be obstacles to developing TODs, because the community saw that their top priorities had been fulfilled (significant levels of affordable housing for low and very low-income households, an anti-displacement policy, and pedestrian improvements) the buy-in from local residents was outstanding.

The San Leandro Crossings will be the first development project in the TOD Strategy Area. In preparation for city council approval of the project, Bridge (a nonprofit housing developer) and Westlake (a for-profit developer) embarked on an ambitious education and outreach process. The project has a strong local base of support from COR (Communities Organizing for Renewal), a faith-based organization with many members who hope to have the opportunity to live in the Crossings. Now that the plan for the affordable project is midway through implementation, the NIMBY opposition has started gearing up for a struggle, but it seems they are fighting a losing battle.

San Leandro has a significant jobs/housing imbalance; 32,000 households as opposed to 42,500 jobs (1.34 ratio).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, there is a scarcity of affordable housing for low income residents; in 2005, less than 20% of San Leandro residents could afford the median priced home and even fewer could afford a market-rate single family home. The city itself is predominantly white, over one-third Caucasian, with an even representation of Asian/African-American/Hispanic minority residents. About one-third of residents do not speak English at home. Roughly 28 percent of San Leandrean households earn between \$25,000 and \$49,999 – the targeted income bracket for the Bridge affordable apartments. To a large extent, San Leandro is already transit-oriented: in the vicinity of the transit station, one-third of residents own no vehicle at all, whereas less than ten percent of city residents overall are without a car. More than a quarter of workers take rail transit to their occupation, easily surpassing the mere 10% than do so in San Leandro proper.

Complaints from local groups run the gamut from standard NIMBY fears over increased crime and traffic to site specific complaints. These specific concerns include criticism over the phasing of the low income units and the changing nature of the development (i.e. from sale to rental). Economic forces have led to some changes in the project's specifications, decisions that some opponents say were made with no local input. There is also a lingering

racism towards those moving down from Oakland, since many current residents left the city themselves a decade earlier and resent what they see as growing encroachment by minority city dwellers. The lack of retail space in the affordable building is also a disappointment to some local advocates. Most significantly, locals decry Bridge's nonprofit status as a financial crisis waiting to happen. Since Bridge would not pay property tax, they worry that funding for schools, police, and other services would be stretched thinner than ever to support new residents.

Parking is an issue raised by concerned opponents over the Crossings development, despite the fact that the current plan calls for 100% replacement of the existing parking spaces and additional new on-street parking spaces on adjacent streets. Despite fierce invective over the overcrowded schools, Bridge and Westlake are required to pay not insubstantial 'School Impact Fees' of \$2.97 per square foot (currently estimated to total approximately \$890,000). City planners estimate the project will increase the number of school aged children by about 60 and this number will be a part of school capacity calculations going forward.

- 1 Data drawn from the 2000 US Census at the block and block group levels.
- 2 Data drawn from the 2000 US Census at the block and block group levels.
- 3 Association of Bay Area Governments, "Housing Methodology Committee: Jobs/Housing Balance," [cited 2009]. Available from [http://www.abag.ca.gov/planning/housingneeds/notes/10-19-06\\_Agenda\\_Item\\_2\\_-\\_Jobs-Housing\\_Balance.pdf](http://www.abag.ca.gov/planning/housingneeds/notes/10-19-06_Agenda_Item_2_-_Jobs-Housing_Balance.pdf).



## Appendix B: The Tools

The tools that were used in the four focus groups can be found in the online version of the report at <http://communityinnovation.berkeley.edu/publications.html>. The following are brief descriptions of each of the tools, and where they were used.

### Brochures

*Let's Talk About Affordable Housing: Who, What, How & Why?* by Nonprofit Housing of Northern California (NPH). Used in Pittsburg and San Leandro. This is one of four related brochures that NPH has created to inform and debunk myths about affordable housing and related issues such as dense development and traffic. It is a two-sided brochure that attempts to define and describe affordable housing and the people who live in it. It contains images of affordable housing developments and of families that who reside there, and provides a list of resources.

*Traffic-Lite: Great Communities Have Less Traffic* by the Great Communities Collaborative (GCC). Used in Diridon. Another two-page brochure, one of many similar brochures created by the Great Communities Collaborative to educate and debunk myths on various aspects of TOD. It uses text, statistics, images, graphics, geographic comparisons and testimony to argue that TODs lead to less, not more, traffic in neighborhoods, and create safe, walkable, accessible communities.

### Presentations

*TOD 101* by Reconnecting America. A basic introduction into the many benefits of developing around transit: congestion relief, environmental benefits, and community improvements. Also discusses the shift in the housing market and demographics that is leading to increased interest in higher density living.

*Plan for Tomorrow* by National Multi-Housing Council. Details what smart growth is and why it is critical for the future growth of this country. Also draws the link between compact development and saving greenfields and cheaper infrastructure.

[The above two presentations were modified and combined into one powerpoint, shown in the Diridon focus group.]

*NIMBY to YIMBY* by the California Department of Housing and Community Development. Used in San Leandro. This presentation argues the need for affordable housing in California, stressing design, good management and so on. A substantial portion is devoted to presenting myths about affordable housing, and "busting" them with the

facts. Because the presentation was too long to be used in its entirety, the myth-busting section alone was used in the focus group.

### Interactive Activities

*How Dense Are You?* by the Great Communities Collaborative Leadership Institute. Used in Pittsburg and Lake Merritt. This is a "quiz" that is meant to make participants rethink preconceived notions about density and affordable housing. It is particularly focused on building design. The quiz uses pictures and questions that play to people's stereotypes, then creates surprise with the counterintuitive or myth-busting answer to show how misleading our assumptions and perceptions on these topics can be. A few slides of the presentation were trimmed for time's sake, and the wording of one slide was altered because the wording was unclear.

*Dialing Up and Dialing Down* by the Great Communities Collaborative Leadership Institute. Used in Pittsburg. An altered version used in Diridon and Lake Merritt. In this activity community members are given a collection of thirteen housing developments of different densities. Participants do not initially know the different densities, and are asked to rank the images in order from lowest to highest density based on their best guesses. The exercise is meant to show that appearances are deceiving, and that design is more important than actual density in creating an attractive building. The original was used in Pittsburg. An alternative version, with fewer buildings and more photos and information (such as floor plans) was used in Diridon and Lake Merritt.

*Additional Activity.* Based on previous activities, one entirely new activity designed by the researchers was used in San Leandro. Various images of affordable housing were shown on a screen; all were from the Bay Area, with some examples from local community. The selection was deliberately comprised of both well-designed, attractive examples, and others that were less so. As each picture was shown, the group was asked to discuss what they did and did not like about each development.





