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Transit-oriented development in Los Angeles: Past, Present and Future

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# POLICY BRIEF

## Transit-oriented development in Los Angeles: Past, Present and Future

2019 | Mark Vallianatos and Madeline Brozen

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

This brief:

- Provides a short history of how transit and land development have often gone hand-in-hand in the Los Angeles region;
- Summarizes research that shows that residential density in greater L.A. is still influenced by long-gone streetcar routes; and
- Recommends ways to achieve greater synergies between housing and public transit investments.

Los Angeles is known for its car culture. But the region’s development patterns and growth history was also shaped by transit, from railroads to streetcars to contemporary rail and bus routes. This interconnection of transit and the built environment over time holds lessons that planners, policy-makers, and developers can learn from today.

The report *Transit-Oriented Los Angeles*, supported by ULI-Los Angeles and LA Metro, examines land uses close to seven Metro stations and recommended zoning changes to advance positive synergies between transit, housing, and the built environment. When detailing the station area existing conditions, the report noted that existing density often followed former streetcar lines and other remnants of LA’s planning past. This brief summarizes the region’s fascinating transit history and explores what can be learned from the past to embrace contemporary transit investments and promote an equitable and thriving future.

### LOS ANGELES’ TRANSIT-ORIENTED PAST

Each of the Los Angeles region’s three main boom periods, when the population grew rapidly, were fueled by development that occurred in concert with the expansion of a new type of transportation. The boom (and bust) of the 1880s launched when the region was linked into transcontinental rail networks. Railroads collaborated with local real estate businesses to offer discounted, one-way “homeseeker” tickets to newcomers interested in relocating to Los Angeles. Settlements near rail depots became some of LA County’s best-known cities, while others like Gladstone,



never took off and withered into forgotten names. When population growth picked up again in the early 20th century, transit-oriented development in the region clustered along streetcar lines. At its height, the Red Line intercity system was the longest electric rail system in the world. It linked Los Angeles to Long Beach, Santa Monica, Pasadena, and Santa Ana and extended east into the inland empire, creating regional connections. The Yellow Line provided frequent service in central L.A.

Streetcars also spurred development that filled in the gaps between existing cities and settlements. Streetcar companies often had affiliated land development entities that bought land and then sold it for development when new streetcar lines were built.



Henry Huntington, who consolidated the Pacific Electric company that operated the Red Line system, stated that his streetcars: “extended.. ahead of, and not behind, the population.”

By the late teens and early 1920s, rising vehicle ownership extended the pattern of dispersed development that streetcars had facilitated. More cars also meant competition with streetcars. Autos and trucks clogged roads, making streetcar service less reliable. L.A. politicians and voters passed up the chance to acquire and modernize streetcar lines. Following the shock of the great depression, streetcar lines were cut back, replaced by motor bus service, and eclipsed by freeway construction.

Traffic congestion continued to be a problem even with more freeways and roads and ever-increasing automobile ownership. In the early 1950s, researchers at Caltech in Pasadena proved that vehicle emissions were the leading source of the smog that was enveloping Los Angeles. To help address these concerns, in 1964 the state authorized an agency to create a new mass transit system in Los Angeles. It wasn't until 1980 that voters approved a tax to implement a plan to build subways and improve bus service. The Metro Blue Line linking downtown Los Angeles and Long Beach opened in 1990, launching a new era of rail transit in the L.A. region.

## **PERSISTENT DENSITY EFFECTS OF PAST TRANSIT**

Los Angeles's current density patterns are closely linked to the location of streetcar stops from a past era. This 'streetcar effect' holds true even taking into

consideration other modern transportation amenities and investments - including freeways and Metro rail stations. Areas where streetcars used to run were more densely populated areas during the streetcar era and have become even denser since. Early zoning in Los Angeles was relatively simple and did not regulate structure size or bulk. Since the 1950's, however, zoning in Los Angeles, and California, have become increasingly more restrictive. Thus, making it more difficult to build the types of dense housing built during the streetcar era, now located near bygone rail stations, much of which would be illegal to build today.

## **ENCOURAGING A LASTING SYNERGY BETWEEN CONTEMPORARY TRANSIT AND HOUSING**

How can jurisdictions in the region ensure that investments in transit in the 21st century can have the same kinds of long-lasting impacts as early 20th-century streetcars? New rail and improvements to bus service are giving L.A. County residents new mobility choices. But density patterns today are less influenced by the modern transit system than by former streetcar stops. At the same time, residents have fewer choices for where they can afford to live. One of the obstacles holding back positive synergies between transit and development is the fact that zoning today is more restrictive than it was during earlier transit eras. Brooks and Lutz note that most streetcar lines were built before zoning; and when zoning was first introduced in the early 1920s, it often allowed a mix of housing types, especially close to streetcar corridors.



What types of strategies could potentially have a lasting positive impact on regional housing affordability, transit ridership, sustainability, and quality of life? The recommendations outlined below, particularly if done synergistically, can achieve a more positive transit-oriented future.

1. Allow more homes close to transit. Obstacles to residential development close to transit include commercial zones that ban residential uses; very low-density limits; zoning that bans apartments; and minimum parking requirements that make it hard to develop some sites and adds to the cost of new residences. We recommend zoning all commercial and underutilized industrial sites to permit homes; allowing at least medium density and Floor Area Ratios on these sites; rezoning single-family lots for townhomes or small apartments; and eliminating or reducing vehicle parking requirements.
2. Incentivize deeded-affordable homes close to transit. The L.A. region needs more housing, but it especially needs homes affordable to the

many lower-income households who struggle with high housing costs. We recommend that jurisdictions adopt strong, local density bonus rules modeled after the City of L.A.'s Transit Oriented Communities Program. Ten-thousand homes, including two thousand deeded-affordable homes, have been permitted during the first year of the TOC program.

3. Allow more homes within a wider radius of transit. Zoning changes to encourage transit-oriented development should extend far enough beyond the immediate station to allow a range of housing types. Brooks and Lutz's research shows that streetcar-oriented density peaks, not right at old streetcar stop, but .5 to .8 kilometers away (approximately 1/3 to 1/2 miles). Jurisdictions should allow more homes within at least a 1/2 mile radius of transit stations. Density limits can be higher at the station and on commercial streets, but diverse low-rise homes should be allowed in this entire TOD radius.

## END NOTES

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