



Catching the Train to Economic Development

Transit Oriented Development is the name; eco-friendly commuting is the game change

BY TARA NURIN

THE COLLINGSWOOD PATCO SPEEDLINE STATION is a visual disappointment. A far cry from the Art Nouveau metro stations in Paris or even the brightly painted stops in Center City Philadelphia, Collingswood offers its railway riders nothing beyond a forgettable utilitarian space surrounded by an interchangeable array of commuters, scattered businesses sheltered in flat buildings, and parking lots. Lots of parking lots.

But it is precisely the Collingswood Speedline station's lack of exception that will propel it to an exceptional future. PATCO has named the borough as the site for one of the first Transit Oriented Development projects in South Jersey, a designation that places

it among the just a few hundred transit stations in the country to serve as an officially sanctioned anchor for a new pedestrian-gear, eco-friendly, neighborhood-sustaining livability that New Jersey and the rest of the nation so greatly lack.

"We believe that TOD is really about creating attractive, walkable, sustainable communities that allow residents to have housing and transportation choices and to live convenient, affordable, pleasant lives," states Reconnecting America, a national non-profit that works to cluster modern development around barren transit stops.

Ditching the car in favor of public transportation to preserve the environment and a gas-buyer's wallet. Choosing to live in a

quaint yet active town near an expansive urban area. Little undeveloped land left to exploit. Voila. Transit Oriented Development, or TOD, often defined as higher density, mixed-use development within walking distance—one half-mile—of a transit station.

"People need cheaper, more efficient options for getting around," adds Tim Halbur, Reconnecting America's spokesperson. "One of the great advantages of TOD is that people can use it for their everyday errands. A lot of trips that are wasted are these little everyday trips in cars that people shouldn't have to do."

Of the 13 municipalities with Park-and-Ride Speedline stations, PATCO announced in April, after commissioning a study to assess

PICTURED ABOVE: A RENDERING OF COLLINGSWOOD'S AESTHETIC FUTURE

the viability of a TOD to increase transit ridership, that it had deemed Collingswood the most actively interested and prepared to move forward in pursuit of these goals.

“We’re already a community that’s oriented to the transit. Developing more there helps our community,” surmises Collingswood Mayor Jim Maley. “We’re ready to go. We want to do something here.”

“This is an excellent opportunity for New Jersey to preserve what open space it has and to really redevelop some of the communities that helped us rise to where we are today,” says John Matheussen, CEO of PATCO and president of the Delaware River Port Authority, which runs the rail system.

Plus, there are all of those parking lots.

“We really didn’t have a detailed, organized plan for the future use of our parking lots,” recalls Matheussen. “We’re looking at seeing what we can do to maximize PATCO’s efficiencies...and if you look at PATCO parking lots...at nighttimes and on weekends, they’re pretty empty.”

While PATCO and Collingswood politicians have promised not to make a move without the agreement of community members at every stage of design and construction of what will almost definitely be a mixed-use, commercial/residential development (in fact, they’re using a \$20,000 grant from the Urban Land Institute to “engage residents in planning charrettes and provide information sessions with expert speakers,” proclaims a borough press release), there is one element that is practically non-negotiable: the new homes, consisting primarily of condos, and businesses, which are mainly offices and service-related stores like coffee shops. These will rise out of the impersonal surface of the North Atlantic Avenue parking lots that pander to greedy automobiles and their driver slaves. Collingswood will replace the lots with vertical parking garages that consume less landmass, with the realization that not all suburban home owners will gleefully sell their McMansions and torch their vehicles in order to move into town. But the aim of the transit village will be to make that an option.

And for those transit-riding commuters who stubbornly cling to their lawnmowers, they’ll have opportunities to patronize shops that can translate to fewer stops during their daily drive to and from the station. “What a lot of transit villages do is have concierge service centers. The dry cleaner has a little office, or the florist does. It’s a place where you can make a quick hit to those shops on your way out,” cites Mayor Maley as examples. “But we would want to make sure that it’s

complementary to our existing downtown... We want to tie it into our business district.”

“Absolutely!” exclaims Antoinette Wisniewski when asked if a transit village would help fortify economic stability on Haddon Avenue, Collingswood’s main commercial street that, despite being heralded as a successful renaissance story, is punctured by an astonishing number of vacant storefronts displaying “out of business” signs.

“You don’t have enough walking traffic,” she observes from Antoinette Gabrielle, her empty Haddon Avenue fashion boutique on a hot, sunny Wednesday. “I don’t think there’s enough of a reason for people to spend the afternoon here. I think it’s great to go out to dinner; somebody might be here for two hours and walk around quickly but there’s no reason to stay here for an extended period of time because you’re not able to go store to store.”

Wisniewski and Mayor Maley both feel strongly that adding retail and services around the train station—located at a far end of downtown Haddon Avenue—will increase walking traffic along the strip by acting as a bookend, with the train station at one end and the celebrated new Lumberyard condos at the other.

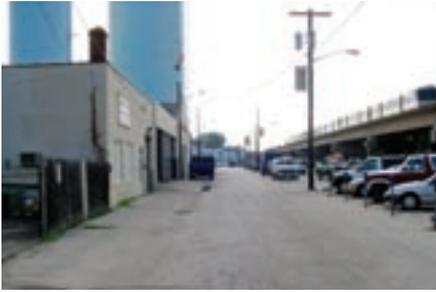
“Every mall places the anchor department stores at the end of the walkways,” compares Mayor Maley. “The concept is that people will be driven to visit the stores in between.”

And The Lumberyard condos, the first new residential development in Collingswood in 40 years, are already proving that if you build it, they will come.

“Already some businesses are feeling the effects of some of the residents there buying things in their stores,” Wisniewski says. “I think the people that live footsteps away from Haddon Avenue are going to be the ones frequenting Haddon Avenue all the time and being the ones to purchase things on the street.”

Barbara Cheski, sales and marketing director for The Lumberyard, which received early state funding for building within the TOD zone, says the majority of her buyers chose The Lumberyard precisely for its proximity to transit. “Many work in Philadelphia, but a lot of them enjoy entertainment in Philadelphia. [It’s] just the ease of getting in and out, in addition to being able to walk right out onto Haddon Avenue, and not have to use a car to go to dinner or do errands,” she says.

Cheski says all of her buyers so far are young professional couples or empty nesters. She’s not aware of any children moving in, which should put to ease the minds of some TOD opponents who fear new housing will raise property taxes by infusing too many kids into the schools. Studies



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predict that buyers of TOD residences will continue to be individuals or couples without school-age tykes, but even if that trend doesn't hold up, Collingswood's got plenty of extra space in its schools to accommodate new little ones.

While neither this issue nor any other has emerged as a significant source of contention in Collingswood (the results of an informal poll on www.livingincollingswood.com were 28-0, in favor), similar plans in Hamilton have divided the community and ushered in a new Republican majority on the township council.

"An issue in our town is overdevelopment and people don't believe we need 1000 homes



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that will be crammed into such a small area," says Republican Hamilton Township Councilman David Kenny.

While this debate causes strife in some TOD towns across the country, almost no one is chasing prospective new residents out of Collingswood. That includes Mayor Maley, who welcomes the growth and considers TOD to be an integral part of it.

"I think it's important for Collingswood to continue growing over the next 50 years. If

you're not experiencing some growth, you're dying," he says.

And Collingswood won't be the last PATCO-based town to grow. Haddonfield, Westmont and Camden's Ferry Avenue station are all being eyed for transit villages. The type of development will depend largely on the specific needs of each community: Haddonfield will likely welcome some new housing and service-oriented businesses, while Westmont appears

prime for a corporate headquarters and Ferry Avenue might capitalize on its location next to Cooper Hospital to provide an array of medical arts buildings.

Whatever use is determined for each site, according to Mayor Maley, the municipalities that follow his down the tracks to Transit Oriented Development will flourish and prosper as a result of their progressive-minded development.

"To me," he says, "TOD is an acronym for the words 'no-brainer.'" ■