



Photographs by David Hunsinger for The New York Times

ON TRACK

In Collingswood, which has state transit village status, a train passes near a cluster of newly built condominiums.

REDEVELOPMENT

A Move to Establish New Life Near the Station

By JILL P. CAPUZZO

ELIZABETH

INSIDE the restored turn-of-the-century train station, guests nibbled on Caesar salad and admired the tin ceiling. To get here, they passed through vacant lots strewn with rubble and pieces of chain-link fencing, the surrounding buildings marked with graffiti. The juxtaposition provided the perfect backdrop earlier this month for Gov. Jon S. Corzine to announce that the 20 acres surrounding the midtown train station would become a so-called transit village.

The following week, more fanfare was bestowed upon the city of Burlington, which also earned transit village status — a designation that, for each of these two latest recipients, included an initial \$100,000 state grant to help support plans for mixed-use development around their train stations.

In the last eight years, the State Department of Transportation has formally designated 19 transit villages around New Jersey Transit rail and bus stations as part of a “smart-growth” effort to encourage residential and retail development at transit hubs.

With the transit village designation, municipalities are eligible for professional assistance and possible state grants, as well as quicker approvals for mixed-use projects. The bigger payoff comes when the most successful transit villages have been able to leverage that designation into millions of dollars in private investment.

In Elizabeth, local officials view their transit village status as an opportunity to help revitalize the city’s aging midtown. The state transportation commissioner, Kris Kolluri, called the addition of Elizabeth “a watershed moment” for the transit village program.

But there has been mixed success with the program. After the press conferences, some towns have found that their transit village designation, which they had hoped would be a catalyst for change, did not accomplish all that was expected.



BENEFICIARY Mayor M. James Maley Jr. of Collingswood points out the tracks from a new condo built on a former lumberyard near the station.

And, as more towns look to be included in the program, some local elected officials are facing strong opposition from residents. Opponents say they do not want any more traffic and development near the train stations, which they say are already too crowded and fail to offer adequate parking for daily commuters.

Plans for 300 new homes, a hotel and extensive office and retail space around Hamilton Township’s busy train station, which has not yet been formally designated a transit village, were recently put on hold after the political makeup of the town council changed. The plans became a major issue in last November’s election because many residents had balked at the proposed transit village plans.

“It’s the easiest thing in the world to get up and say ‘No more development,’” said Glen Gilmore, the mayor of Hamilton and an advocate of the transit village plan. “But you have to recognize the reality that the population is growing, and this is exactly the kind of development you want.”

In nearby West Windsor, local officials began holding public workshops last week on plans to develop 350 acres surrounding the busy Princeton Junction train station. There, residents and commuters have raised concerns about more development around an already overcrowded

train station, which has enough parking for only half of the station’s 7,000 daily commuters. The waiting list for a parking permit is seven years.

State financing for the program is also an issue. From 2002 to 2005, the program received \$1 million annually, but no state money was earmarked for transit villages for the current fiscal year. The state has, however, identified \$2 million in federal funds that can be used for transportation and air-quality studies related to transit villages.

FINANCIAL awards to individual towns have also been somewhat arbitrary, ranging from \$650,000 for Metuchen to nothing for Netcong.

“There’s been no standardization of what you’re going to get with this designation,” said Jan Wells, an assistant research professor at the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University. “In reality, the carrots they are putting out there now are probably federal dollars.”

Some communities have found the designation helpful. The mayor of Collingswood, M. James Maley Jr., said that his town received no additional funds when it was first named a transit village in 2003, but that the designation did provide leverage for other state grants.

“Unfortunately, there hasn’t always been money attached,” Mr. Maley said, “but it gives you brownie points that can get you money from other departments for studies and planning.”

The designation also increases the potential to attract private dollars.

“Developers see towns designated as transit villages as much friendlier places, there’s a welcome mat outside,” Ms. Wells said. “And towns say, now that I’m a transit village, developers will want to come here.”

However, she said, it is no magic formula. The transit villages that have been most successful are ones that have spent years planning and building community support.

Such is the case in Collingswood, which has transformed its downtown. In the next several weeks, residents will begin moving into the first of 119 luxury condominiums being built on the site of an old lumberyard a few blocks from the train station.

In Rahway, a \$16 million renovation of the train station has spawned development of 86 town houses along the river, as well as plans for a 15-story mixed-use development, including 20,000 square feet of retail space, a 102-room hotel and 200 condominiums.

For every success story like Collingswood or Rahway, there are stalled transit villages, like the one in Pleasantville, where the area around the bus station has little appeal to private developers, or at the Matawan-Aberdeen station, where plans for 500 new homes have been blocked by disagreements between the two municipalities.

One problem has been in tracking which projects are working and which are not. Reporting requirements for transit villages have been strictly voluntary, said Ms. Wells, whose office has been in charge of monitoring the program since 2002. This year she received annual reports from 9 of the 17 previously named transit villages.

“Some just don’t have anything to say,” Ms. Wells said. “Others just don’t have the staff to keep track of all the information that’s requested, and that is a problem.”

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