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CITYSPACE

El of an Opportunity



Let's bring sensible development to our mass transit corridors.

by Paul Steinke

Nothing Doing: Surrounding the intersection of 46th and Market sts. in almost every direction is vacant and nearly vacant land.

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Recently I climbed the steps of the 46th Street Station of the Market-Frankford El, bound for Frankford Terminal to see the new station at the end of the city's busiest commuter line. Standing on the platform and gazing out over the West Philly cityscape, the view both disturbed and inspired me.

Surrounding the intersection of 46th and Market streets in almost every direction is vacant and nearly vacant land. Here are large, empty parcels adjacent to a rapid transit line that races downtown in mere minutes. I imagined instead a landscape of new houses, apartments and shops filling the emptiness, bustling with residents who zip downtown every day for employment, dining and entertainment, and return in minutes to their transit-accessible homes.

"What an opportunity!" I thought: Here could be a place for folks priced out of downtown housing to hang their hats a force for stabilizing the city's plummeting population a tonic for SEPTA's perpetually declining ridership.

But then I shook off my fantasy and took a closer look at what lay around me, on both sides of the tracks at 46th and Market. To the south, a new Rite Aid surrounded by parking was built a few years ago. To the north, a low-slung supermarket set way back from Market Street hunkers down amidst hundreds of parking spaces.

And then it hit me: My fantasy of new neighborhoods hugging the El is steadily being crowded out by sprawling, low-density pharmacies, groceries and strip centers strongly oriented toward automobiles, but hostile to the hordes of consumers on foot using the El a few steps away. The pattern is found elsewhere. One stop east of 46th Street, half a block from the 40th Street El station, a new car-friendly Eckerd drugstore went up last year on a long-vacant lot. And at the other end of the El, across from the brand-new Frankford Terminal, a mammoth new suburban-style Walgreen's greets the vast number of adjacent transit commuters with a vast expanse of asphalt.

Some may say that retail-starved city neighborhoods should welcome the arrival of clean, well-stocked stores and the jobs they create. But I say that forcing Philadelphians, who have the second lowest rate of car ownership in the nation, to trudge across an inhospitable landscape of paving and parked cars in order to fill their prescriptions is dehumanizing and destructive to the quality of city life.

I think we can have it both ways -- new retail and a revitalized urban form -- but to make it happen we're going to have to change the way we think about vacant land and development in this city. SEPTA and the city need to embrace transit-oriented development (TOD), a fancy term that simply translates as public policy that encourages new development clustered near transit facilities.

Other cities are aggressively pursuing transit-oriented development opportunities. The Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area Transit Authority employs dedicated staff to match developers with empty parcels adjacent to Metro lines. Their website describes this "joint development program" as giving "priority to projects which reduce automobile dependency; increase pedestrian/bicycle originated transit trips; provide mixed-use development, including housing; and the opportunity to obtain goods and services near transit stations and offer active public spaces." Portland, Ore., also manages an aggressive TOD program. Even in car-choked Atlanta, the MARTA transit agency actively promotes a variety of transit-oriented development opportunities.

Back in Philadelphia, plenty of opportunities remain. As the El snakes through Kensington and Frankford, it traverses enormous tracts of emptiness within sight of downtown skyscrapers. Along the Broad Street subway, from South Street



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empty land remains. The same is true of North Broad, for example, the only vacant after several failed development attempts.

is essentially to say, "We're not real estate developers, we run buses but SEPTA working in tandem with city government could jointly identify transit-oriented development sites around town, and then seek developers to build transit-friendly projects. Meanwhile, the Planning Commission and City Council could modify the city's development regulations to protect these sites from wasteful, low-density development in favor of higher-density projects that would take better advantage of the SEPTA system while simultaneously creating a safer, livelier city.

Fortunately, there is hope. A bill currently being considered by the Pennsylvania state legislature directly addresses the issue of transit-oriented development. Known as the Transit Revitalization Investment District Act, House Bill 994 boasts over 50 bipartisan co-sponsors. It would authorize partnerships between transit agencies, governments and the private sector to link economic development and public transportation assets.

The only thing at stake here is the city as we know it. Either we rebuild a city that leverages our existing transit assets, or we create a car-oriented, suburban-style city that renders its transit facilities redundant. What choice could be clearer?

Paul Steinke is board chairman for the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia.



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