

An aerial photograph of a transit station, likely in Pasadena as indicated by the station name on the building. A train is stopped at the platform, and several pedestrians are walking on the sidewalk. The background shows a mix of urban buildings and greenery.

Suburban TOD: Where and Why it Works

WALKSACRAMENTO

According to the national community development nonprofit Reconnecting America, transit oriented development (TOD) is a type of development that focuses on building a mixture of housing, office, retail, and other amenities within a quarter mile of transit stations with the intent of increasing ridership and reducing car trips to transit. TOD are most successful when they provide compact housing with walkable connections not just to transit, but also to nearby shopping and services. While TOD are typically seen in larger cities that have the population density and transit infrastructure to support this kind of development, there are cases where TOD have been successful in suburban settings as well. TOD can be challenging in suburban areas due to a history of land use patterns that have prioritized low density “bedroom communities” and auto-oriented development over pedestrian, bicycle, and transit supportive land use. However, suburban communities across California are increasingly turning towards TOD as a strategy to address housing needs, economic revitalization, and environmental concerns.

WALKSacramento is a nonprofit community organization leading the Sacramento region in developing safe, walkable communities that promote health and economic growth. WALKSacramento works with transportation and land use planners, elected officials, and community groups to create safe, walkable environments for all citizens and particularly for children, seniors, the disabled, and low-income individuals. Studies have shown that a high number of transit users walk or bike to transit, which improves health through daily physical activity. TOD further encourages active travel through compact, mixed-use development and convenient access to transit that provides opportunities for residents to access a greater number of jobs, services, and other destinations without cars. Additionally, research has shown that residents living near transit stations are five to six times more likely to commute via transit. Beyond transit ridership and health benefits, TOD can also help revitalize local economies, increase housing supply, provide affordable housing options, relieve congestion, conserve open space, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions and local air pollution.

Where TOD has been successful in suburban communities, there has consistently been a strong commitment to develop and implement local policies that support established goals related to air quality, health, and livability over traditional development patterns. Despite prevailing suburban development patterns and high single-occupancy vehicle miles traveled, these communities have intentionally and proactively prioritized transit and development that supports active modes, not allowing the status quo of auto-oriented development to impede good policy development or adherence. The following case studies of communities in San Diego and Bay Area suburbs provide insights for best practices and lessons learned that can be applied to similar auto-oriented communities near transit in the Sacramento region.

City of La Mesa

La Mesa Boulevard Station and Grossmont Transit Center

Site Background and Local Context

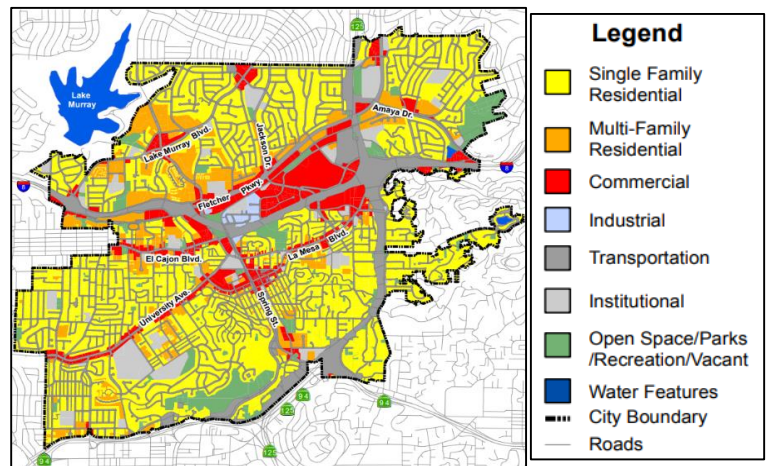
The City of La Mesa is a largely suburban community located approximately 13.5 miles east of downtown San Diego. The City is highly built out, covering a total of 9 square miles with single family residential housing encompassing 46% of the area. Five transit centers provide trolley service along the Orange and Green lines to downtown San Diego and other regional destinations. These transit centers also serve all of La Mesa's major employment centers, including downtown La Mesa and the largest regional hospital in East San Diego County.

Like many other transit systems throughout the state, the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) trolley system was developed along existing freight rail rights of way adjacent to commercial and industrial uses that were not specifically designed to enhance passenger travel. Additionally, most stations were originally built with large parking lots to accommodate first-mile and last-mile travel by car rather than by alternative modes. The City of La Mesa identified these parking lots, vacant parcels, and adjacent commercial properties as opportunities for increasing mixed use housing and transit ridership, leading to the development of the region's first TOD in 1989 and elevating La Mesa as a regional leader for TOD implementation.

Two of the most successful TOD in La Mesa have been La Mesa Village Plaza and the Pravada and Alterra Apartments. La Mesa Village Plaza was completed in 1991 and provides 95 condos above first-floor retail that are connected to the La Mesa Boulevard Station by a pedestrian plaza. The Pravada and Alterra Apartments were completed in 2008 at the Grossmont Transit Center and replaced a 600 space surface parking lot with four story buildings containing 527 one and two-bedroom apartments, 80 of which are designated affordable housing units. These projects demonstrate how strong visions and leadership at the City can prompt growth and revitalization around suburban transit corridors.

Supportive Policies

The City of La Mesa began planning for TOD when the trolley first came to La Mesa in the late 1980s. Aside from supporting housing and transportation objectives, the City recognized the role of TOD in accomplishing other goals including economic development and quality of life. Policies in the City's General Plan support compact infill development focused around transit corridors, and in 2008 the City supplemented the General Plan with a Mixed-Use Overlay Zone to revitalize transit corridors, increase housing opportunities, and provide neighborhood-level commercial activity that supports walkable environments. The overlay zone provides additional standards and design guidelines for mixed-use



City of La Mesa existing land uses.

Source: [General Plan Land Use and Design Element](#)



Grossmont Transit Center and parking lot before redevelopment.

Source: [MTS TOD Presentation](#)



La Mesa Village Plaza at the La Mesa Boulevard Station.

Source: [McCormick Construction](#)

residential and commercial projects along transit corridors. All new development is subject to the standards of the overlay zone, and projects involving new gas stations or other automobile uses require a conditional use permit. Additionally, the City's Climate Action Plan identifies infill TOD as a critical strategy for reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMTs) and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. On a regional scale, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) developed a Regional Transit Oriented Development Strategy that provides guidance for creating more vibrant transit oriented districts throughout the region, including compact development, pedestrian and bicycle improvements around transit, and public-private partnerships to attract developers and spur investments in available land near transit.

Outcomes

La Mesa has continued the trend of compact, smart growth development around transit corridors since the 1980s. This commitment to its TOD policies has led La Mesa to attain a 2010 baseline greenhouse gas inventory significantly lower than that of the San Diego region due to fewer and shorter trips taken by car and a higher usage of transit and alternative modes of transportation. Several TOD have also been successful at decreasing car trips to transit, evidenced by a 60% peak occupancy rate at the Grossmont Trolley Center.

Beyond emission reductions and increases in active modeshare, individual TOD have also brought greater investments and increased economic development to the surrounding areas. In the case of the Grossmont Trolley Center, the Pravada and Alterra apartments provided a financial stimulus for public improvements to the station itself, including platform enhancements, ADA accessible structures, and enhanced pedestrian access to nearby employment and entertainment centers.



Grossmont Transit Center pedestrian bridge connects transit to housing and the nearby Grossmont Shopping Center.

Source: [Riha Construction](#)

Prior to its first TOD in 1989, the City of La Mesa developed as a car-centric community with low density single family homes and roads designed for car travel. Despite this auto-oriented setting, the City has maintained a commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving the local economy through the development and implementation of strong TOD policies, which has not only led to marked improvements but has also demonstrated that there is a model for retrofitting suburban contexts to support transit, walkability, and mixed land uses.

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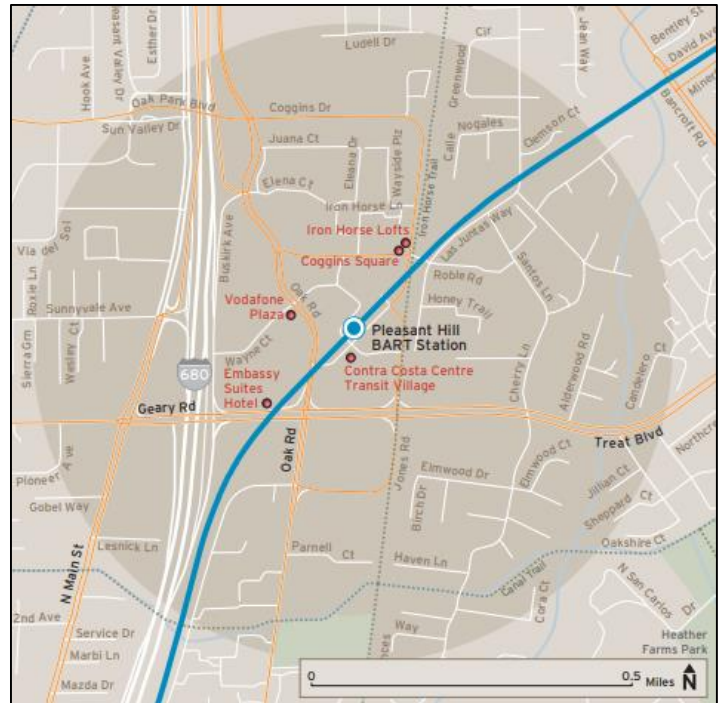
Contra Costa County

Contra Costa Centre Transit Village

Site Background and Local Context

Contra Costa County is located in the East Bay region of the Bay Area and has nineteen incorporated cities with a total population of approximately one million. A large extent of the County is comprised of suburban “bedroom communities,” with 59% of the workforce commuting to workplaces outside the County. Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), the region’s passenger rail service, has twelve stations located throughout Contra Costa County that provide service on three lines, Richmond to Daly City/Millbrae, Richmond to Warm Springs, and Antioch to SFO/Millbrae.

The Contra Costa Transit Centre is located next to the Pleasant Hill BART station, near downtown Walnut Creek in the unincorporated County. The Pleasant Hill station is adjacent to the I-680 freeway, which provides connections north towards Sacramento, south towards San Jose, and east towards Oakland and San Francisco via Highway 24. The I-680 corridor is surrounded by primarily commercial, light industrial, and multifamily residential uses. This portion of the County is characterized by wide arterial streets that provide access from outlying single family neighborhoods to the freeway. BART stations in the County were originally built with large parcels of parking lots to accommodate the auto-oriented nature of these suburban communities.



Contra Costa Transit Centre site context.

Source: [MTC](#)

The Contra Costa Transit Centre is a 125-acre mixed-use district that is the result of a public-private partnership between developers, Contra Costa County, BART, the Contra Costa Centre Association, and the Contra Costa County Redevelopment Agency (CCCRA). Throughout the 1980’s and 90’s, CCCRA had been acquiring land around the station and developing commercial office spaces and housing along with public amenities including lighting, landscaping, art,



Multifamily housing at the Contra Costa Centre Transit Village.

Source: [East Bay Times](#)

and pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. The Contra Costa Centre Transit Village was part of the development plan for the area and was intended to replace several BART parking lots with mixed-use multifamily housing and commercial spaces. This was met with strong public opposition against higher density housing and removing parking. CCCRA, BART, and the developers engaged stakeholders in a charrette process to address concerns and incorporate public feedback into the design guidelines, which helped the community understand the benefits of the project and ultimately gain their support. The Transit Village was completed in 2010 and includes approximately 2.4 million square feet of office and commercial space, 50,000 square feet of retail and restaurants, and 2,700 residential units.

Supportive Policies

Contra Costa County has been identified by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission's (MTC) regional plan, Plan Bay Area, as a target for future job and population growth. In accordance with these projections, the County has identified Priority Development Areas where growth should be concentrated in mixed-use and transit-oriented spaces. The Contra Costa County Climate Action Plan also includes policies that focus on TOD and pedestrian oriented development as strategies to foster economic growth and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. BART has its own TOD policy that focuses on increasing ridership and creating housing and economic connections around BART stations. Research has shown that home values increase with proximity to BART stations, which provides leverage for BART and local jurisdictions to support further TOD investments.

Outcomes

The Contra Costa Centre Transit Village is one of the most successful TOD in the Bay Area, and particularly notable for being one of the first TOD in a suburban community in the region. Part of its success has been due to continued management through the Contra Costa Centre Association, a nonprofit mutual benefit corporation that coordinates planning and services for residents and businesses. The Contra Costa Centre Association manages Transportation Demand Management (TDM) programs that provide incentives for alternative transportation. Due to this combination of transit proximity and TDM programming, over 30% of residents and employees at the Transit Village have used alternative modes for over 20 years. The Association has received over \$500,000 in grants throughout the history of the Transit Village for TDM programs including vanpool vans, BART tickets, shuttle buses, EV charging stations, and bike lockers.



Aerial view of higher density office buildings and housing at the Contra Costa Transit Centre.

Source: [California Planning & Development Report](#)

Despite initial opposition from neighbors who were accustomed to the bedroom-community feel of the area, the County and its partners were able to communicate the benefits of TOD for improving economic development and community character. Another challenge with the Transit Village has been vacant space and tenancy, since market conditions forced development to occur in phases and has taken several years to reach a critical mass. However, perseverance and commitment to the overall vision and plan for the area have led to the Transit Village becoming a model for TOD throughout the nation.

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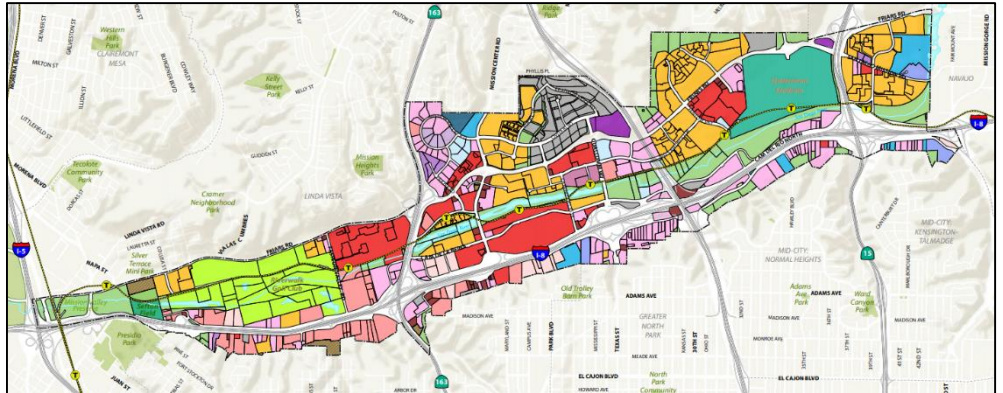
City of San Diego: Mission Valley Community

Rio Vista West

Site Background and Local Context

Mission Valley is located at the geographic center of San Diego along the I-8 corridor and is bisected by Highway 163, I-805, and I-15. The Mission Valley planning area comprises approximately five square miles along the San Diego River, with the primary land uses consisting of commercial office and retail and open space. Mission Valley has a small but growing population of 21,000 scattered throughout the valley in relatively compact, multifamily housing.

The trolley Green Line runs through Mission Valley, with eight stations providing service to the area. Mission Valley is a major regional shopping destination and hosts several big box stores and large lot shopping malls. Despite the area's focus on large retail services over the past sixty years, the City of San Diego has identified Mission Valley as a prime location for housing and community-level services due to its proximity to transit and connections to downtown jobs and cultural destinations. In 1985 the City adopted the Mission Valley Community Plan (last amended in 2013), which set the vision for the valley to develop integrated land uses, connected walkway and bikeway systems, and greater dependence on public transit in order to achieve overall objectives for residential quality of life, economic vitality, and congestion relief.



Existing land uses, including commercial (red) and residential (orange).

Source: [Mission Valley Community Plan Update](#)

A transit village was planned around the Rio Vista West station and developed in the 1990s. The Rio Vista West Master Plan originally designed for a mix of residential and small-scale commercial with attractive pedestrian environments, and was successful in providing mid-rise, relatively high-density housing close to the station entrance. The development also



Apartments and pedestrian promenade at Rio Vista West.

Source: [Apartment Ideas](#)

has a strong mixed-use core and promenade that encourages walkability and provides connectivity to the station. Due to the large scale of the project and market conditions of the time, however, the small-scale commercial and pedestrian shopping promenade was replaced with an auto-oriented big-box retail center, which was thought to be more viable in the suburban setting. Even so, the big-box retail buildings were designed to better accommodate pedestrian uses through strong pedestrian and transit orientation, hidden parking, and landscaped paths and plazas in an effort to minimize the feeling of being in an auto-oriented space.

Supportive Policies

The City of San Diego was one of the first cities in the nation to adopt citywide TOD design guidelines. The City's design guidelines were adopted in 1992 and demonstrated cutting edge policies at the time for a city primarily dominated by automobile transportation and sprawl. The guidelines identify the relationship between transit and land use as critical for accomplishing compact, efficient development that provides benefits including reduced congestion, increased housing supply and affordability, and economically thriving communities. An Urban Village Overlay Zone was also added to the zoning code in 1997 to allow for greater variety of uses, interconnected streets, and other design features that promote walkability and interactive neighborhoods. Additionally, the San Diego Housing Commission created a three-year plan in 2011 that outlines strategies to facilitate transit-oriented affordable housing that aligns with the goals in SANDAG's Regional Transit Oriented Development Strategy and Regional Transportation Plan.

Outcomes

While Mission Valley still faces challenges with poor pedestrian connectivity and a history of auto-oriented development, the area's location along the Green Line provides an opportunity for greater investment in TOD. The City is currently in the process of updating the Mission Valley Community Plan to better leverage Mission Valley as a transit corridor (as identified in the San Diego Climate Action Plan), improve pedestrian and bicycle connectivity to retail and transit, and right-size retail according to market trends and community needs. Land use patterns have been changing to accommodate new growth to the community in the form of increased residential and mixed uses. New development projects such as the residential mixed-use Millennium Mission Valley project and Civita master planned community are continuing the trend of smart growth and mixed-use TOD in Mission Valley, proving that a market for TOD exists even in suburban, auto-oriented contexts. Rather than continuing the pattern of big box, car-centric retail development, the City is making strides towards developing further TOD supportive policies in order to transition Mission Valley into a more livable community.



Streets in the Rio Vista West development tend to be auto-oriented and disconnected from other segments of the development.

Source: [KPBS News](#)

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Bay Area Tri-Valley: Cities of Dublin and Pleasanton

West Dublin/Pleasanton Station and East Dublin/Pleasanton Station

Site Background and Local Context

The cities of Dublin and Pleasanton are located in the East Bay Area, approximately 40 miles east of San Francisco. Dublin and Pleasanton are separated by the I-580 freeway that provides connections west towards San Francisco and east towards Stockton, and are bisected by the I-680 freeway that provides connections north towards Sacramento and south towards San Jose. Dublin and Pleasanton are both relatively low-density suburban communities, with populations of 60,000 over 15 square miles and 82,000 over 24 square miles respectively. The average commute times of residents of both cities is 30 minutes, indicating that much of the workforce commutes regionally.

The cities share two Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) stations: East Dublin/Pleasanton (located at the terminus of the Dublin/Pleasanton to Daly City line) and West Dublin/Pleasanton. Both stations receive a high percentage of riders



Pedestrian plaza connecting the Avalon apartments to the BART station.

Source: [Niles Bolton Associates](#)



The Galloway at Owens is located across from the East Dublin/Pleasanton station.

Source: [Padmapper](#)

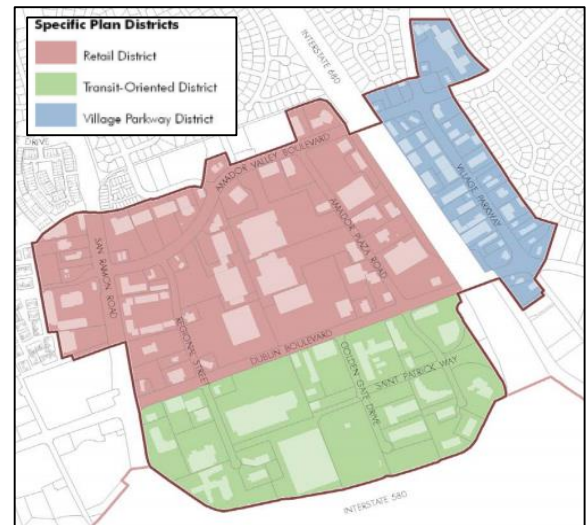
commuting from cities outside Dublin and Pleasanton, and as such accommodate car travel through large parking lots and garages. Additionally, the land uses around both stations contain auto-oriented business park offices, commercial retail, and light industrial, including several big box stores and auto dealerships. The West Dublin/Pleasanton station is also located adjacent to the Stoneridge Mall, a large regional shopping destination.

Several developments have been completed around the BART stations within both cities over the course of the past twenty years. Large parcels of mid-rise housing complexes were developed on vacant lots near the East Dublin/Pleasanton station in Dublin, creating the feel of a transit village through plazas and wide, tree-lined walkways. On the Pleasanton side, the City adopted the Hacienda TOD Standards and Design Guidelines in 2011 that provide guidance for incremental development of a TOD village on three vacant sites near the East Dublin/Pleasanton station in the Hacienda Business Park area. The Design Guidelines have led to the development of The Galloway at Owens and The Galloway at Hacienda, which provides mixed-use housing and retail space in conjunction with streetscape improvements to improve pedestrian connections to the station.

Dublin and Pleasanton also began planning for TOD in coordination with BART when preparing for the West Dublin/Pleasanton station, which was completed in 2011. To date, approximately 6.5 acres of mid-rise housing has been developed in Dublin near this station demonstrating a strong market for TOD style development in these traditionally auto-oriented communities.

Supportive Policies

In response to growing demand for housing in the Bay Area and increased congestion along the interstate freeways, Dublin and Pleasanton have developed policies supporting TOD and smart growth that have guided development around BART stations. The City of Dublin's General Plan identifies parcels around BART stations as an opportunity for development and has highlighted the area adjacent to the West Dublin/Pleasanton station as a transit-oriented district with mixed-use residential, office, and retail through the Downtown Dublin Specific Plan. In 2002, the City of Dublin amended zoning codes around the East Dublin/Pleasanton station to support TOD and mixed-uses as well. The City of Pleasanton's General Plan identifies TOD as a strategy to reduce car trips and address housing availability and congestion challenges, followed by a zoning amendment in 2012 that allowed higher density on nine sites throughout the City. Additionally, both cities highlight the importance of TOD in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and vehicle trips in their Climate Action Plans, listing specific actions to incentivize TOD and attract developers in order to accomplish emissions reduction goals.



Transit-Oriented District (green) located near BART.

Source: [Downtown Dublin Specific Plan](#)

Outcomes

The cities of Dublin and Pleasanton are traditionally low-density, auto-oriented suburban communities that have taken advantage of their transit assets and made strides towards TOD implementation. BART ridership at both the East and West stations has steadily increased, in part due to the proximity of housing developments. While both stations remain auto-oriented due to extensive use from riders outside the cities, BART, Dublin, and Pleasanton have taken greater steps to proactively address street design and station access in an effort to improve multi-modal connectivity, particularly for residents living within walking and biking distance. Pleasanton's Hacienda TOD Guidelines are one example of strategies that address housing and street design as factors influencing active travel. BART adopted a Station Access Policy in 2016 to plan for investments in multimodal accessibility at auto-dependent stations such as the ones in Dublin and Pleasanton, and also voted against building an additional parking garage in Dublin.

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Conclusion

Suburban TOD continues to find success in some of California's most auto-oriented suburban communities. This success is commonly catalyzed and supported by Cities and agencies that have developed and prioritized implementation of strong land use and transportation policy that sees suburban settings not as an impediment to TOD but as an opportunity. Many suburban communities that have supported TOD both through high level planning initiatives and project-level interventions that make projects more transit supportive, have made measurable progress toward improving economic development, health, and air quality.

In Sacramento, a similar opportunity exists to further strengthen and prioritize our TOD land use policies in a way that sends a signal to communities, developers, and funders that we are serious about creating more transit-supportive, walkable communities.



Union City Station District