

Statement on Proposed Transit-Oriented Development Zoning Bills

by
Joanne Aitken, AIA, Chair

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On Tuesday, February 24, 2009 City Council's Committee on Rules is scheduled to hold testimony on Bill 080130, that if adopted would amend the City's Zoning Code to create a new zoning classification called "Transit-Oriented Development District." While the Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia is highly supportive of transit-oriented development, this bill raises significant concerns.

Transit-oriented development, in general, is a strategy for structuring dense, walkable development with a mix of residential, commercial, and office uses within close proximity of a major transit stop (usually ¼ mile radius or less). This strategy takes advantage of transit stops as activity hubs to support retail and other uses and promotes alternative transportation because people who live close to transit are not auto-dependent.

There are numerous areas in Philadelphia where transit stops could benefit from denser, mixed-use development since many areas around transit stops are zoned for relatively low density housing, industrial, or commercial uses. DAG acknowledges that the current zoning around transit stops can be inappropriate.

However, the solution is not for City Council to create a new "Transit-Oriented District" for the Zoning Code. Such a zoning category is often appropriate in the suburbs, where the area around a municipality's sole transit stop requires a unique zoning classification. In contrast, in an urban area such as Philadelphia with an extensive transit network, much of the city is located within one quarter-mile of a transit stop.

Due to the diversity of buildings and neighborhood contexts surrounding Philadelphia's major transit stops, transit-oriented development is not something that can be structured within a single zoning district. Rather, achieving the beneficial goals of transit oriented development in Philadelphia requires a holistic revision of the code to include a series of new zoning classifications that will promote pedestrian-friendly, medium-to-high density mixed-use development. DAG believes this can best be accomplished through the work being done by the Zoning Code Commission and its national and local consultants.

DAG applauds City Council for focusing on progressive planning concepts such as transit-oriented development to meet Philadelphia's future needs but urges Council not to pursue the issue by means of this bill. Although this bill includes

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innovative and desirable features such as bicycle parking and reduced requirements for automobile parking which enhance the pedestrian realm, there is no one-size-fits-all solution for development around transit in Philadelphia. A single TOD district will not serve our city well.

Having wisely created the Zoning Code Commission to address the zoning issues facing the City, Council should allow this appropriate process to run its course. Through the zoning revision process, now well underway, the ZCC will, we trust, develop a range of modern zoning classifications to complement the full range of Philadelphia's dense, historic, and intensively transit-served urban fabric. The ultimate goal is an appropriate range of zoning classifications that can be mapped to meet a variety of needs without overlays. Such an appropriate code, with careful mapping, will encourage the by-right development which, in the end, provide the greatest benefit the City and all of its inhabitants.

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Members of the press

The Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia is a volunteer organization whose nearly 1000 members come from a broad spectrum of disciplines and share an interest in design, development, and planning. DAG's mission is to encourage public discussion about design and to advocate for design excellence.