

City Planner Survey Reveals the Most Common Tools for Promoting Transit-Oriented Development

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August 2020

POLICY BRIEF

Issue

Transit-oriented development—higher density residential or mixed-use development centered around high-quality transit stations—can reduce the need for driving and cut vehicle greenhouse gas emissions. It can also play a role in revitalizing downtowns, improving accessibility for residents, and preserving open space. For these reasons, state and local governments in California have adopted goals and policies to support transit-oriented development.

Despite its benefits, transit-oriented development faces multiple barriers. Projects may face more complex planning, financing, and regulatory hurdles, and often entail higher land and development costs compared to greenfield development. Local governments are confronting these challenges through the adoption of innovative policy, planning, and finance tools. Researchers at the University of California, Davis surveyed almost 150 city planning directors in California’s four largest metropolitan areas to better understand cities’ motivations for supporting transit-oriented development, the challenges

encountered, and techniques employed in achieving their transit-oriented development goals. The results presented here are from the first part of a two-year study.

Key Research Findings

Two-thirds of surveyed cities have adopted policies, programs, and plans to promote transit-oriented development. The most frequently cited motivations for supporting transit-oriented development included improving community livability, mobility, and accessibility, and providing housing, including affordable housing. Substantial complexity in policymaking patterns was also evident, as cities’ motivations, perceived barriers, and policy choices were quite varied.

Cities that have adopted transit-oriented development policies and programs are employing a wide variety of strategies to achieve their goals (Figure 1). Popular strategies include using density bonuses to support affordable housing, mixed-use zoning, development of Specific Plans (neighborhood-scale plans) that tailor policy measures to transit-proximate areas,

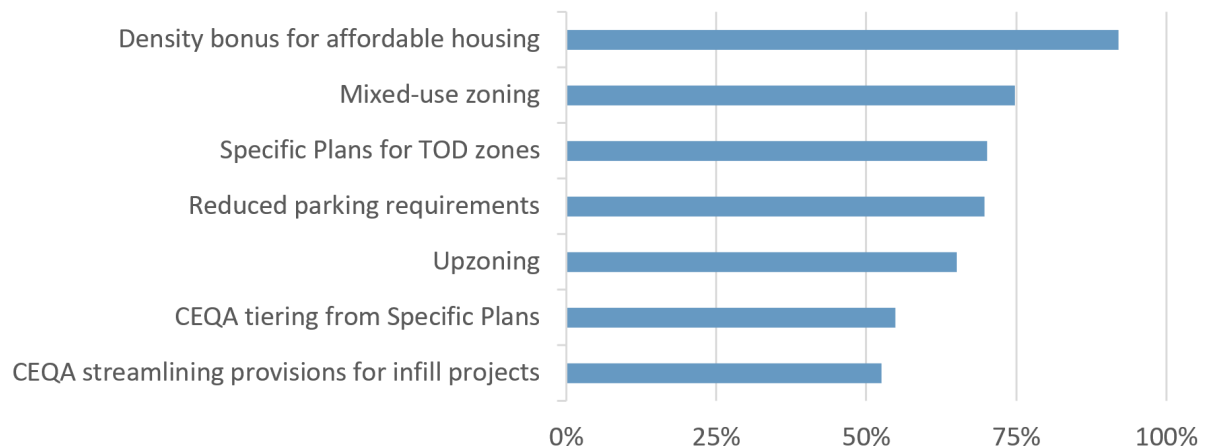


Figure 1. Policies or strategies adopted by half or more of respondent California cities with policies and programs to promote development near transit.

reduced parking requirements and upzoning (allowing denser development) for development near transit, and strategies for streamlining environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). CEQA-related strategies involve specifically “tiering” project-level review from Specific Plans and utilizing available streamlining mechanisms for review of infill projects.

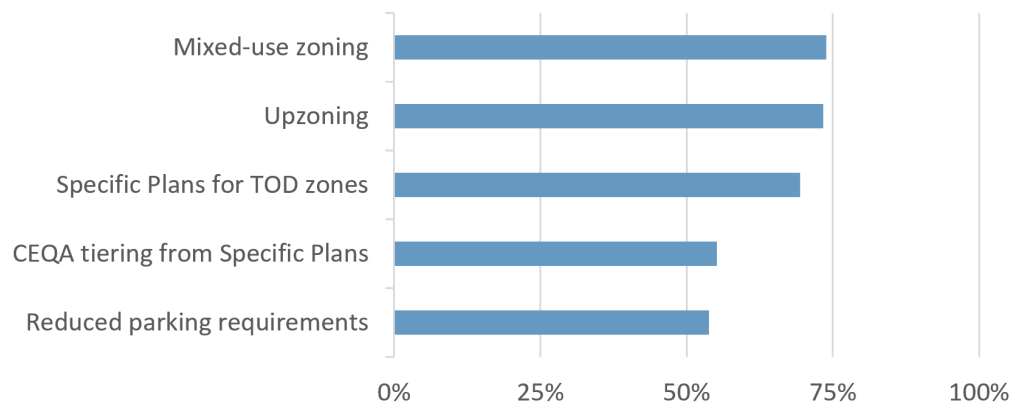


Figure 2. Policies or strategies perceived as “very important” by half or more of adopter cities for promoting transit-oriented development.

Zoning tools were viewed as the most important strategies for achieving transit-oriented development goals. Both mixed-use zoning and upzoning were considered “very important” by almost 75% of respondents in cities that had adopted these tools to promote transit-oriented development (Figure 2). Other tools viewed as very important by most adopter cities included developing Specific Plans for areas near transit stations, using these plans to streamline environmental review, and reducing parking requirements for development near transit.

The tools viewed as most important for promoting transit-oriented development were not necessarily the most frequently adopted. For several policy measures, including upzoning, streamlined permitting in transit-oriented development zones, subsidies for affordable housing, and parking pricing, perceived importance by adopter cities was substantially higher than overall adoption rates for the policies. The reverse was true for some other strategies, most markedly for density bonuses. Less than half of respondents rated their density bonus policy as very important for promoting transit-oriented development, despite almost universal adoption of this strategy. These discrepancies suggest that despite their potential impact, some strategies may be challenging to implement due to political opposition or other factors.

Relatively few survey respondents cited residential opposition or lack of market interest as major barriers to transit-oriented development in their communities. While these factors are often cited in public discussions, both were considered a “major obstacle” by only about one-quarter of respondents. The most commonly reported barriers were lack of vacant land, difficulty in assembling land parcels, and inadequacy of transit service and facilities. These factors, particularly transit facilities and service, tend to be more directly under public agencies’ control.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from “Planning and Policymaking for Transit-Oriented Development, Transit, and Active Transport in California Cities,” a research report from the National Center for Sustainable Transportation authored by Elisa Barbour, Salvador Grover, Yulia Lamoureaux, Gyanendra Chaudhary, and Susan Handy of the University of California, Davis. The full report can be found on the NCST website at <https://ncst.ucdavis.edu/project/local-finance-and-planning-mechanisms-transit-oriented-development-transit-and-active>.

For more information about the findings presented in this brief, please contact Elisa Barbour at esbarbour@ucdavis.edu.

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