

Developing real estate projects near Tri-Rail and other transit systems will help control South Florida's traffic congestion



As South Florida's population sees significant growth in the coming decades, the current system will not accommodate all those additional people and cars.

Driving to and from work in their cars alone no longer will be the norm, and developers are willing to stake their businesses on the prospect.

Transit-oriented development (TOD), is the way of the future, they believe.

"It's been my main focus as a board member advocating for more TOD zoning and more TOD projects," says Andrew Frey, a Tri-Rail board member and principal with Tecela, a real estate development company.

"Everyone that lives and works in those kinds of developments gets the benefits of public transportation – reduced cost of living for residents, access to jobs, and on the business side, more customers, more convenience.

"We have to celebrate the benefits of TOD, and we have to go out and do more of it," Frey says.

Others are on the same page.

"It seems the area is making significant transition to where people and businesses want to be near transit," says Lowell Clary, who has been a finance consultant to governments and businesses on public-private projects.

"The bottom line is congestion has gotten very challenging."

Aaron Stolar, associate vice president for Miami-based 13th Floor Investments, sees a future without traffic congestion – in fact, he sees a future without many cars. Stolar is the lead on a \$550 million project to build

1,400 residential units with a grocery store, public plaza, retail and more on seven acres of surface parking lots at the Douglas Road Metrorail station.

“We like to think that we're a group that thinks about trends and actually does something about it,” Stolear says. “We think the world is changing, and we think autonomous technologies are going to take over and people are not going to own a car in the future.” The Link at Douglas, as it will be called, is slated to break ground late this year or early in 2019.

Under the public-private partnership with Miami-Dade County, the company will be able to lease the land from the county in exchange for renovating the train station, investing \$17 million in public infrastructure. It also will pay the county 3 percent of gross rents, Stolear says.

Transit wallet, not a parking space

Stolear says 13th Floor is constantly looking at more transit-oriented development deals. “Out of the next five projects, one or two will be TOD (transit-oriented development),” Stolear says. The company wants to be at the forefront of a coming transportation revolution where instead of giving people parking, developers will give people a “transit wallet” to access any number of options, be that train, bus, bicycle, ride-sharing or other methods.

Other such projects are in the works in the region. Developers Grass River and Terra have a 90-year ground lease from Miami-Dade County to develop the Coconut Grove Metrorail Station’s five-acre park-and-ride. Private operator Brightline has just debuted a Miami station for its passenger rail service, spurring healthy competition among developers who want to build there. And additional apartments are being built around Dadeland at the southern end of the Metrorail system.

A decent foundation has been laid in Miami in terms of regulations encouraging transit use in the city, said Jeremy Calleros Gauger, deputy director of the planning department for the city of Miami. That includes easing requirements around parking and development density, he said.

Now it’s up to the development community to build more densely and closer to train stations, and that is what’s starting to happen, he says. Tri-Rail’s Coastal Link project extending a line into downtown is in particular a “major game-changer” in getting people closer to transit, he says.

That proximity is critical from a planning perspective. “The park and ride concept isn't really viable,” Calleros Gauger says. “For one, if you’re already in your car, you’re much less likely to pay a fare and then hop on the train.

“And it’s pretty widely known the last mile is the most difficult,” he says. “Getting to and from the station tends to be the hindrance that discourages transit use. So getting the density closer to the station is good for the transit system in terms of ridership. Then, you have a true alternative to just relying on your car. “

The city is studying the prospects for additional train stations to be built and managed by Tri-Rail, such as one on the northern edge of the city near 79th Street, Calleros Gauger said. It would be surrounded by mixed-use development.

“What you would have is almost an additional city center directly connected by rail to downtown.”

Connecting transportation and zoning

The excitement around transit has not always been the case, says Tri-Rail’s Frey.

“We built Tri-Rail and Metrorail about 30 years ago,” Frey says, “What we didn’t do was orient our development toward the train stations, capitalizing on the investment we made.”

In Miami-Dade County in particular, housing was developed in the southwest and northeast parts of the county, far away from transit. “Many, many households didn’t get the benefit from the transit we built, and the transit system has suffered from low ridership, low fares and the need for outsized public subsidies as a result,” Frey says.

The region has shown a “persistent lack of understanding of the need to link transportation investments with zoning and development that supports it,” he says.

Progress has been made, Frey says, pointing to the benefit developers will realize thanks to a recent change in rapid transit zoning law that removed parking requirements in Miami-Dade County. Frey authored the legislation.

“So all this development that’s now occurring at the Metrorail stations has the flexibility to include as much or as little parking as they want as we shift society away from using cars,” Frey says.

Likewise, the City of Miami has provisions allowing developers to shift parking requirements off-site into a nearby garage, train station or high-frequency bus corridor, up to a 30 percent reduction in required parking.

Learn more about South Florida Regional Transportation Authority's [Transit Oriented Development policy](#).

South Florida Regional Transportation Authority's vision is to ensure [a viable regional transportation structure](#). SFRTA operates Tri-Rail.