



BY KATIE PORTERFIELD

Life on the Rail

All aboard the transit-oriented development express?

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It has been a little over a year since the Music City Star commuter train began offering Wilson County residents a ride to and from Nashville. The first of seven proposed corridors, the East Corridor extends from the Nashville Riverfront and makes two Wilson County stops in Mt. Juliet and Martha before reaching the end of the line in Wilson County's largest city, Lebanon.

While hundreds are utilizing the new rail as an alternative to traffic jams and high gas prices, many are also recognizing the Star's potential as a catalyst for development. Yet, some Wilson County officials and others assisting with city planning efforts are not

touting just any kind of development—they have something specific in mind.

"I'm hoping that we can aim a little higher and create transit-oriented development," says T.K. Davis, design director of the Nashville Civic Design Center and an associate professor at the University of Tennessee School of Architecture. "TOD is different from conventional development that happens to be adjacent to a transit stop. It's integrated carefully at all levels to make it work cohesively."

Perhaps a foreign concept to many, transit-oriented development is a growing trend that's more than just a buzz word in cities such as Charlotte, N.C., Denver

and Portland, Ore. The idea is to create a mixed-use, walkable community offering housing, retail, restaurants and offices within about a 2,000-foot radius of a transit station. Driven by smart growth initiatives, TOD promises to reduce sprawl and traffic congestion, while satisfying a burgeoning demand (by singles and retiring baby boomers) for smaller homes in quality urban areas.

Davis was present when Lebanon officials and residents kicked TOD discussions into high gear at a workshop entitled "Envision the Potential for Transit Oriented Development for Lebanon's Town Center and Its Inner-City Neighborhoods." Spearheaded by the Middle Tennessee American Institute of Architects Chapter through the AIA 150 BluePrint for America Grant Program (celebrating the 150th anniversary of AIA), the workshop (also sponsored by Cumberland Region Tomorrow) attracted 140 Lebanon residents and 24 AIA architects and designers.

Maggie Tilton, director of planning for the city of Lebanon and one of the local leaders who co-chaired the event, says the workshop took place at an opportune time because the city is ramping up efforts to revitalize its historic square, while simultaneously building on commuter rail's potential. As a result, the Lebanon Planning Commission and the Lebanon Board of Zoning Appeals are beginning to review the city's zoning ordinances to possibly allow for more mixed-use projects.

"We wanted to introduce or re-familiarize those two boards with the concept of transit-oriented development, educate citizens and allow them to give feedback," Tilton says.

The city is already constructing a walking and biking trail system that connects the commuter rail with the town square. The trail, which will open this spring, cuts through The Mill at Lebanon, an old woolen mill that has been converted to a 15-acre, 200,000-square-foot space for retail, entertainment, office and residential use. The Mill spokesperson Diane Parness says there's also room for a boutique hotel and

spa, making The Mill and Lebanon a destination point.

Meanwhile, farther west, Mt. Juliet officials are interested in TOD-like opportunities that coincide with plans to create a traditional town square. Davis, who has had UT students design TOD plans for Mt. Juliet as part of their curriculum, believes Mt. Juliet has the most immediate potential for change because it has so much open land surrounding its transit station. One such piece of land, says Kenneth Martin, economic and community development director for Mt. Juliet, is a county-owned, 12-acre lot across from the transit station (once home to an elementary

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school) that was recently rezoned for development as a commercial town center.

“We’re looking for something there that will generate a lot of foot traffic,” Martin says. “I’d like to see upscale, multi-family condos where people can walk out their door and visit a retail area. On the front end would be the town center concept with loft-style apartments above smaller shops, so business owners could rent space, live at the top and have a store at the bottom.”

And because it’s likely that Mt. Juliet will need a new city hall and police station in the next several years, Davis says Mt. Juliet “could have this new civic presence and a primary TOD space as a heart for a town that doesn’t have a square.”

Naturally, the Music City Star, which, by providing transportation, is the impetus for this type of development, stands to benefit as well. Allyson Shumate, project manager at the Regional Transit Authority, says about 634 people rode the Star per day in the months of June, July and August. RTA’s goal is to attract 1,500 a day, and although the Star is trending in the right direction (between March and June, ridership numbers

increased by about 200 people per day), a TOD is likely to give the numbers a major boost.

“All it would take is one serious developer to do a bona fide TOD, and the ridership would quadruple,” Davis says.

The challenge, though, is convincing residents who fear the density associated with such developments that

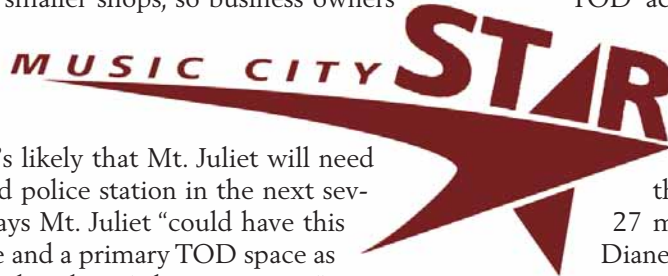
TOD actually preserves open space. But as

Wilson and other Middle Tennessee counties continue to grow, those who commute to Nashville will continue to seek relief from longer, gridlocked one-way trips that, in 2006 were already more than

27 minutes for Wilson County residents.

Diane Thorne, executive director of the Regional Transportation Authority, says mass transit is the future for moving people in Middle Tennessee, and TOD can be a part of that future. With front-end planning and careful collaboration, Wilson County has the opportunity to create vibrant, walkable communities that can improve quality of life across the region. After all, the other six potential Music City Star corridors are watching. **tn**

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