

San Antonio's Transit Plan: A Toolkit for Neighborhoods

Introduction:

The [SA Corridors Transit-Support Land Use \(TSLU\) Framework](#) is a laudable document, but one that has potentially negative consequences for inner city neighborhoods. VIA has given us the opportunity to “get it right,” to form policies in partnership with neighborhoods and all stakeholders, including the COSA that serves not only the 1.3 million newly born and those relocating here in the next decades, but for the people who live here now. [The SA Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan](#), a “roadmap” to San Antonio’s future, “recognizes the importance of our existing neighborhoods. These treasured assets are the foundation of our city and will continue to play a critical role in our future planning efforts.” (Sec 4.1)

Public transportation is one of the most important pieces to making San Antonio a great place for us to live, as well as a spur to job growth. Our neighbors who are vulnerable, who have been part of the community for generations, should be able to stay in their homes; our neighborhoods should be safe with a decent quality of life; and our unique and historic housing stock should be preserved. Thriving neighborhoods, efficient transportation, and revitalized businesses can only happen with us all working together in an inclusive and transparent process to create a transportation plan that will produce a “world class transit system” (Framework p1) to help make our city even better.

Description of TSLU:

There are five parts (separate online documents) to the SA Corridors TSLU Plan draft.

- [SA Corridors Transit-Supportive Land Use Framework](#) is a general description of the plan and its goals, and objectives. It presents a snapshot of SA’s present conditions and future potential, especially with the use of “typology” a “powerful tool that helps classify and differentiate transit communities by the size and type of investment that fits them best.” (p.15) Most important to note is the “TSLU Strategies” which are the tools, zoning and incentives, for

development that the City offers to promote density in the area (up to a half mile) surrounding the corridors.

- [**SA Corridors Future Land Use Corridors Profiles**](#) provide information about the process and issues pertaining to all corridors and then addresses specific profiles. These profiles include Austin Highway, Commerce-Houston, Fredericksburg Road, General McMullen, New Braunfels, San Pedro, Zarzamora. These corridors, which encompass many neighborhoods, are up to fifteen miles long. Do not assume by the name of the Corridor that it does not affect neighborhoods that seems unconnected. For example, the New Braunfels Corridor directly affects Alta Vista and Beacon Hill, the Pearl and Five Points; the Austin Highway Corridor affects Mahncke Park and the Bandera Corridor affects Five Points as well.
- [**Station Concepts**](#) are examples of the station area development. A station concept is defined as “a point of entry into the transit system that consists of more than a waiting area. Stations are located outside of the public right of way, meaning that buses have to exit the right of way to board passengers. They also have a greater footprint, due to bus queues and parking/loading areas. Stations often have an enclosed structure on site, providing restrooms and vending areas.” (“Transit-Supportive Land Use Toolkit” from the *VIA 4040 Plan*, p. 37) Examples of the Station Concept include, but are not limited to, East Point on the San Pedro Corridor, Fresno on the San Pedro Corridor, Maurine on the New Braunfels Ave Corridor, Pearl on the Austin Highway Corridor, Willow Springs on the Randolph Corridor, and Zarzamora on the Commerce-Houston Corridor.
- [**Station Area Plan Five Points Fredericksburg Corridor**](#) explains the Station Area Planning part of the Transit-oriented Development (TOD) that “addresses the need for denser development around transit stations.” Perhaps most troubling is that “developers working on properties located within a ¼ mile of a ‘transit station’ can request

that TOD Special District standards apply to their development project, rather than the standards offered in the property's base zone." (p. 25)

The Station Area Plans includes plans for Five Points on the Fredericksburg Corridor and Huebner & Babcock on the Huebner/Grissom Corridor. These plans offer examples of in depth study of stations that exist today and how they might function in the future. Particularly interesting to note is the "Infrastructure Vision" for Five Points that includes a half-mile radius (p.12) and the Zoning and Policy Strategies (p. 15), Redevelopment Strategies (p.17), and the Catalytic Strategies (p.18).

- [Executive Summary](#) is a brief summary of goals and the Framework.

Five Specific Issues of Concern:

The TSLU Framework has several areas of weakness that need to be addressed to help make our neighborhoods more viable:

- 1. IDZ, zoning, and land use categories recommendations**
- 2. Inappropriate use of incentives**
- 3. One-size-fits-all policies that can be detrimental to neighborhoods.**
- 4. Affordable housing issues**
- 5. Meaningful public input process**

- 1. *IDZ, zoning, and land use categories recommendations:*** Many of the recommendations ignore the specific conditions of neighborhoods and instead rely on general theory that may not be appropriate for every inner city neighborhood.

The Comprehensive Plan states that "the City can develop policies to encourage higher-density housing in some areas while preserving our

existing neighborhoods.” (Sec 8.7) It also states, “that the City should “ensure Infill Development is compatible with existing neighborhoods” (Sec 10.12) The following are some of the recommendations from the Framework that should be carefully vetted to ensure this compatibility:

Create special zones a quarter mile within the transit stations for development for density: The Station Area Planning part of the Transit-oriented Development (TOD) “addresses the need for denser development around transit stations.” Of concern is the idea that “developers working on properties located within a ¼ mile of a ‘transit station’ can request that TOD Special District standards apply to their development project, rather than the standards offered in the property’s base zone.” (Framework pp. 25, 26).

Extending Infill Development Zones (IDZ): –“IDZ provides flexibility in terms of parking standards, setbacks, and density maximums and tends to produce transit supportive development. The City of San Antonio should consider extending IDZ to station areas in conjunction with the TOD Special District to provide a broader range of tools for developers.”

IDZ has been problematic in inner city neighborhoods prompting a recent CCR in April 2017, by District 1 Councilman Roberto Trevino to review the Unified Development Code (UDC) Infill Development Zone (IDZ) because “it has stressed neighborhoods with density, lack of parking, and minimal setbacks. These developments are in fact changing the characteristics of inner city neighborhoods, esthetics, and ambience and at times with a negative effect. After hearing the Zoning Commission concerns, the quality of life for our neighborhoods needs to be taken into consideration at this time.” It is inappropriate for the City to adopt measures that have proven so detrimental to neighborhoods that they are under review.

Apply IDZ Standards for Small-Scale Infill – “Smaller infill parcels on block faces that are primarily single-family residential in nature should be subject to compatibility standards to those that currently exist in IDZ. Specifically, *Sec. 35-343(c) – Sec. 35-343(m)* of the UDC” which has to do with such issues as lot and building specifications, urban design, and buffers and streetscape planting. (Framework p. 28)

Expedite Permitting in Station Areas: “The City should consider waiving the site planning requirements currently included in both the IDZ and TOD zoning standards for development proposals in designated station areas...” which implies there would be no oversight of developers. (Framework p. 28)

Waive Traffic Impact Analysis Requirements in TOD Districts

Transfer of Development Rights (TDR)– TDR is a voluntary, incentive-based program that allows landowners to sell development rights from their land to a developer or other interested party who then can use these rights to increase the density of development at another designated location. (Framework pp. 6, 26)

2. *Inappropriate Use of Incentives*- Incentives, or any other development tool should not be considered “as of right” and automatically applied. The “range of tools” to incentivize, such as the use of IDZ, tax abatements, fee waivers, impact fee waivers, forgivable loans, and tax rebates and other recommendations are flawed in their use as evidenced by the recent CCRs dealing with zoning, IDZ, and incentives indicate. We have seen abuse of incentives when it is used in neighborhoods to promote incompatible infill for density.

3. *One-size-fits-all policies that can be detrimental to neighborhoods*
Neighborhoods struggle to include language in the Plan that would preserve the integrity of our inner city neighborhoods and counter a “one size fits all” approach to Corridor development. As one resident states in a recent letter to Councilman Trevino, “There is a lack of specificity of the terms used and the document implies incentives ‘as a right’, where it would be more appropriate to state ‘as appropriate.’ The Framework in the introduction to Chapter 2 states: ‘San Antonio is a dynamic city...across its 500 Square miles, no two neighborhoods are exactly the same.’ We agree; and, therefore in a complex, diverse, city it is necessary to apply incentives ‘as appropriate’ to preserve the culture and livability of the city along all thirteen corridors.” Qualifying language* added to the Framework alleviates some of the problems of a one-size-fits-all approach.

4. Affordable Housing Recommendations

This framework does not provide adequate tools to promote in-place and new affordable housing. One of the Comprehensive Plan's policies is to "Develop and implement a plan to preserve and maintain affordable rental and ownership housing for lower income residents within revitalizing neighborhoods," (H P34, Sec10.12) and the TSLU Framework should be compatible with this policy as well as address the question: "How can the City be proactive in mitigating impacts of gentrifying neighborhoods, especially near Downtown?" (Sec 10.2)

The TSLU Framework makes recommendations to address housing in the sensitive downtown neighborhoods: "In areas where development is already occurring, it may not be appropriate to engage in some of the affordable housing preservation activities [land banking, affordable housing reserve fund]. Rather, the focus should be on incentivizing affordable housing production." (p.31) In other words, residents in gentrifying downtown neighborhoods should begin packing. While the Framework charges that the City, "should use incentives and policy tools to keep existing residents from being displaced," the policies for downtown neighborhoods seems to be written for the benefit of for-profit developers instead of the people living in our communities.

The tools suggested in the Framework are inadequate or counter to the Comp Plan's goals for neighborhoods. The tools described are the use of inclusionary zoning and its attendant density bonus.

Inclusionary Zoning — "requires or incentivizes developers to include below –market rate housing in their projects. Though mandatory inclusionary zoning is expressly prohibited by Texas state law, cities can offer voluntary inclusionary zoning policies such as incentives that make it economically beneficial for developers to provide a certain percentage of the units as affordable." (Framework pp. 30-32) Although this is a potential tool to try and encourage new affordable housing, the reality in San Antonio in the past is that the City gave incentives to housing that offered only a few affordable housing options in expensive housing complexes.

Density Bonus – One example of inclusionary zoning which offers additional height or density to developers in exchange for some percentage of affordable housing units regardless of zoning in an area

The Housing Commission to Protect and Preserve Diverse Neighborhoods voiced some serious concerns at their last meeting (October 10th) when the TSLU plan was presented to them. Specifically, they were concerned that only for-profit developers were consulted in developing its recommendations and questioned not only the idea but the numbers and their effectiveness used in the TOD District Proposed Density Bonus. (p. 32). They explained that if non-profit developers were consulted, the plan could have been made much more successful in ensuring workforce housing.

The newly formed Mayor's Housing Policy Task Force, created in response to address a severe affordable housing shortage and displacement in inner city neighborhoods, is given the charge to develop a compassionate housing policy. Before we go forward with any development-oriented transportation plan, we should wait for their recommendations. Because COSA is working on affordable housing through the Task Force and the Commission, there will be justified criticism of all efforts if the public does not see a unified effort with particular emphasis given to affordable housing and protecting / assisting current home owners and renters to assure that we have stable and livable neighborhoods.

5. Meaningful Public Input

While the City staff works hard a citizen input and does a good job, input and feedback are two different types of endeavors. Although there have been many meetings with sticky notes and requests for "tell us what you'd like to see," or internet input opportunities, it is not the same as having an effective voice with feedback and dialogue with the City. As one resident states, "The meetings were more about buy-in than real input..." Before any drafts of plan are adopted neighborhoods, as well as other stakeholders, should have an opportunity to study the document and submit recommendations with feedback from the City.

Conclusion:

Tier One Neighborhood Coalition (T1NC) came before the Comprehensive Plan Committee on October 18th when the TSLU Framework was presented and asked council members Shirley Gonzales (D5), Roberto Trevino (D1), John Courage(9), Rey Saldana (D4), and Cruz Shaw (D2) to consider delaying the adoption of the TSLU Plans until all of the CCRs that deal with zoning, land use, and incentives have been resolved, the concerns and questions raised by the Housing Commission addressed, the

Mayor's Task Housing Task Force presents its recommendations, and the public, particularly the affected neighborhoods, have had a chance to contribute meaningful input with City feedback. While the Comprehensive Plan asserts that "...the plan is a blueprint for focusing future growth and development away from existing neighborhoods and into regional centers, urban centers and along major transportation corridors. When coupled with the creation of new neighborhoods in currently underdeveloped areas of the City, the result will be less development pressure on existing neighborhoods," (Sec 4.4) the opposite seems to be recommended in the TSLU. The Committee voted to delay until January 2018.

It is important that inner city neighborhoods voice their concerns and insist on feedback and changes. As a neighborhood leader wrote, "...the document generally fails to communicate that it is concerned for the people who will be served by the needed expansion and improvement to our transit system and how we move / transit the city. The plan may be based on solid principles of planning but it does not have sufficient discussion on how it is designed from a human dimension and how it will assure the enhancement of a healthy, safe environment for the public."

Resources:

[SA Corridors TSLU](#) (completed, and seeks adoption by City Council approx. January 2018)

[SA Corridors](#)

[VIA Vision 2040](#) (2014)- the genesis of the TSLU Plan

[SA Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan](#) (2017) – describes many of the corridor plans elements

[San Antonio Transportation Plan](#) (2012)

Overview by Ricki Kushner:

Incentives Mentioned in TSLU Framework:

Development regulations [p.5]

Zoning regulations

 Infill Development Zone (IDZ) [p.6]

 Mixed Use District (MXD) [p.6]

 Transit-Oriented Development District (TOD) [in vicinity of transit stations] [p.6]

 Expedited permitting [p.28]

Traffic Impact Analysis Requirements waiver [p.28]
Extend IDZ outside CRAG [p.28]
Apply IDZ to single-family parcels & blocks in a TOD [p.28]

Design standards

Investment tools

Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ) [p.10]
Inner City Reinvestment/Infill Policy (ICRIP) [p.10]
Community Revitalization Action Group (CRAG) [p.10]
Center City Housing Incentive Policy (CCHIP) [p.10]
Tax Abatements [p.10]
Promise Zone [Eastpoint area] [p.10]
Choice Neighborhood [Wheatley Courts] [p.10]
Historic Tax Credits [p.10]

Impact waivers [not sure whether this is an investment tool] [p.13]

Infrastructure investment [p.24]

TOD Special District standards [developers can “opt in”] [p.26]

Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) [buy and sell density][p.26]

Density Maximums and Parking Minimums [p.27]

Vacant Dwelling Tax Credit [p.29]

TSLU Grant Programs [p.29]

Land Banking [p.30]

Affordable Housing Reserve Fund [p.30]

Density Bonus [p.31]

***Examples of Qualifying Language:**

The words, “while preserving the neighborhoods which are the building blocks of every plan” which echoes the SA Tomorrow Comprehensive

Plan's idea that "the first building block is perhaps the most vital as it will continue to be home to the majority of San Antonio's residents" (Sec 4.2) should be added to many of the goals of the Framework. For example, one of the goals that is "Coordinate economic development efforts and land use plans to encourage and incentivize employment growth with regional centers and along transit corridors" could be qualified by adding the words, "*while preserving the neighborhoods which are the vital building blocks of every plan*" at the end of the goal. (Framework p.4)

Another example of the helpfulness of the insertion of qualifying language is in the section of Development Incentives (Framework p. 24) where it states, "Building on a range of tools already available in the City of San Antonio and suggestions for additional tools." The words "where appropriate" should be added to the end of this and other recommendations.