

The Daily Transcript[®]

Established 1882

www.sdtranscript.com

Friday, April 27, 2018

Circulate San Diego sees better use of MTS land

By Thor Kamban Biberman

As policy makers digest Circulate San Diego's report on redeveloping underutilized Metropolitan Transit System land, just how many housing units will actually be built on each of these properties remains uncertain.

Circulate San Diego, a nonprofit advocate of public transportation and sustainable growth, concluded that as many as 8,800 residential units could be developed around transit sites throughout the county.

The grassroots organization said while MTS has dedicated vast amounts of land to parking -- about 57 acres -- only a fraction of it is being used.

"Some of that parking may be appropriate given the current levels of demand," the report stated. "However, much of that parking is demonstrably not used. MTS has a substantial opportunity to leverage underutilized real estate for public benefit."

Circulate San Diego executive director Colin Parent said the biggest opportunity for redevelopment of an MTS site is the 9.4-acre Grantville Trolley Station.

"That parking lot (which has 246 parking spaces) is two-thirds empty," he said.

Parent, who wrote the Circulate report, said as many as 1,500 residential units could be developed at the Grantville location.

While the report said the property currently allows for 109 units per acre -- which would only enable 1,024 units to be built -- Parent said a 50 percent density bonus for the provision of affordable housing brings the figure to more than 1,500 units.

Parent said another 1,150 units or so could be developed at the El Cajon Transit Center, which has 481 parking spaces, along with bus bays. A specific plan amendment is in process, but exactly what that will look like wasn't clear.

In Chula Vista, the roughly 5-acre Palomar Street Trolley Station could potentially yield about 750 residential units that, again, would be mostly multifamily. The approximately 4-acre E Street Station, meanwhile, could yield more than 600 units, according to Circulate San Diego.

"They're all over the place," Parent said.

He also estimated that about 440 units could be developed at the Massachusetts Avenue Trolley Station in Lemon Grove.

Other locations where new housing could conceivably be developed include the H Street Trolley Station in Chula Vista, the Palm Avenue Station in the South Bay, the Baltimore Junction Station in La Mesa, and the trolley station at 12th Street and Imperial Avenue in the East Village.

Although MTS has developed numerous sites around the county, Parent said the problem is that during the last decade, at least, the developments have only been the result of unsolicited proposals, not through a request for qualification/request for proposal (RFQ/RFP) process.

"They should put out an RFP," he said. "That way you make sure the agency gets competitive bids."

The report also recommends MTS adopt a portfolio goal to deed 35 percent of residential construction on agency land as affordable. That policy could result in as many as 3,093 new homes on MTS land that would be permanently affordable for low income renters.

Among the properties that MTS has developed include Creekside Villas at the 47th Street Station in Southeast San Diego; Sweetwater Union High School District Adult Education Extension at the 24th Street Station in National City; Morena/Linda Vista Development on the Green Line in Mission Valley; Grossmont Trolley Apartments at the Grossmont Transit Station in La Mesa; and the Villa Encantada Apartments at the Encanto/62nd Street Station in Southeast San Diego.

The Grossmont Transit Center is on the Circulate San Diego survey even though there is already a TOD development on the site. When the TOD project was built, MTS required the developer to build substantial amounts of parking. The result is a parking garage made available to MTS customers.

"This is only 60 percent occupied at peak hours," Parent said.

The Morena/Linda Vista parking lot is a part of another joint development project, but it has 90 percent utilization.

Requests for comment from MTS officials were not returned at presstime.

thor_biberman@sdtranscript.com