

MTS adopts policy to build housing on underused lots



Courtesy of Circulate San Diego

MTS will actively solicit bids to redevelop underutilized lots under policy changes recommended by

By Mark Armao

To spur the development of housing near transit stops, the Metropolitan Transit System's board of directors voted last week to change its joint development policy to encourage the redevelopment of its underutilized parking lots throughout the city.

The changes were recommended by Circulate San Diego, a nonprofit that published a report in April finding that MTS has at least 57 acres of developable land, which could accommodate up to 8,000 housing units, many of which could be reserved as affordable housing for low-income families.

On Thursday, under the leadership of MTS chair Georgette Gómez, the board voted unanimously to adopt the organization's recommendations.

The new policy directs the agency to issue requests for proposals for priority sites and to actively solicit bids from developers.

It also requires that 20 percent of any residential development on a site must be reserved for low-income housing, and eliminates a requirement that forced new developments to replace or maintain the parking that would be eliminated by the project.

"What's really important about this vote is that it's getting MTS to be involved in addressing our affordable housing crisis, and they're using some really underutilized public assets really effectively," said Colin Parent, executive director and general counsel for Circulate San Diego. "Not only are we creating more places for people to live, but we're also creating them where they can be the most valuable, which is near our transit stops."

Previously, MTS only acted on a property when a developer approached the agency with interest in a parcel.

Parent said the new policy not only commits the agency "to actually moving on these properties and making that a priority for staff," but also increases the likelihood that the agency-and the public-gets the best value for a given property via the competitive bid process.

Adding low-income housing near transit will provide a number of benefits to the community, Parent said. For residents, having a station nearby will make transportation more affordable and will reduce the greenhouse gas emissions caused by driving cars, Parent said, adding that the agency will make money from the lease payments for the property.

While the agency and housing advocates expressed the need to make housing developments on the lots as dense as possible, Parent admitted that building housing at the report's suggested level of density-which was based on the allowable density of a lot next to the Grantville Station-may not be financially feasible for developers.

"It may not be financially viable at that density," he said. "But what the report shows is that, depending on market conditions, you could really accommodate a lot of units on these properties."

In the coming months, MTS will develop guidelines detailing how it will process development proposals moving forward.

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