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MTS seeking developers for 12th & Imperial transit site



Photo courtesy of CoStar

The 67-unit Villa Encantada apartments at the 62nd Street/Encanto trolley station is similar to what MTS wants developed at 12th & Imperial.

By Thor Kamban Biberman

The Metropolitan Transit System issued a request for qualifications within the past 10 days for development teams interested in building a mixed-use development at one of the busiest trolley stops in the county.

The two-acre site at 12th and Imperial streets has the potential for 500 units, according to MTS, but how much housing is ultimately built on the property could end up being very different. It also isn't clear just how much retail or even office space could be part of the development.

The advocacy firm Circulate San Diego said the request for qualifications (RFQ) for the project is a direct result of the group's advocacy efforts.

"Our groundbreaking report 'Real Opportunity' called on MTS to transform its empty parking lots into affordable homes," Circulate stated. "In particular, our report showed that MTS needed to update its joint-development policies to create more development on transit agency land."

Circulate also called on the agency to issue RFQs and RFPs (requests for proposals) to ensure that taxpayers get the best value for the transit properties, and to ensure the agency identifies priorities and takes action to develop.

Circulate San Diego executive director Colin Parent said the 12th and Imperial proposal is particularly noteworthy because MTS had not gone through an RFQ/RFP process "for at least a decade."

"This where three lines intersect," he said. "I think this property is a great opportunity ... It will generate a lot of interest."

"Building more homes near transit can help address our region's affordability and climate crises," Circulate stated.

MTS said it is "seeking to identify qualified development teams with the vision, resources and expertise to promptly develop a large, contiguous, and highly visible, mixed-use residential, transit-oriented development on property owned by MTS in downtown San Diego."

Circulate San Diego said MTS's new joint-development policy guarantees that projects on agency land will provide on-site affordable homes as well as good jobs.

In addition, Circulate said building housing near transit "will allow more people to live and work near our region's transit investments."

"Making public policy, and developing real estate take a lot of time," the organization stated. "We shouldn't anticipate a development on 12th and Imperial immediately. However, this recent step by MTS shows that Circulate's advocacy is working, and that regional transportation agencies can take positive steps to improve transportation and sustainable growth in the region."

MTS is slated to accept RFQs on the 12th and Imperial project until Dec. 20.

The demand for affordable transit-oriented developments can be particularly high.

MTS reported that as many as 2,000 families were on a waiting list for the 67-unit Villa Encantada project at the 62nd Street/Encanto trolley station prior to the completion of move-ins at the end of last February. The demand was so high, developer AmCal Multifamily Housing stopped taking applications.

The final phase, a 100-space park and ride for trolley passengers, opened Feb. 25. The apartment complex is a 20-minute trolley ride to downtown via the Orange Line.

Villa Encantada is also designed as a LEED Silver Building with cost-efficient and energy saving sustainability features.

MTS recently updated its joint development program to more aggressively cultivate partnerships to redevelop its top-tier park and ride locations into TODs. Program changes include prioritizing density, setting aside 20 percent of units for qualified low-income families, and identifying partners through a competitive bidding process.

Other properties MTS is actively looking for redevelopment partners include:

- * Palm Avenue Transit Center -- 3.96 acres (250 estimated units)
- * Grantville Trolley Station -- 9.37 acres (1,000 estimated units)
- * El Cajon Transit Center -- 7.2 acres (400 estimated units)

* H Street Transit Center -- 3.13 acres (125-280 estimated units)

* E Street Transit Center -- 4.15 acres (170-390 estimated units)

Although the 12th and Imperial project is the first of its kind with an RFQ/RFP process, MTS has worked collaboratively with other agencies to build housing along transit lines in San Diego.

Other recent joint venture projects include the Grossmont Transit Center with 527 units (80 affordable) and the Creekside Villas Apartments/47th Street Trolley Station with 144 units (43 affordable).

Just how many housing units will be constructed in the vicinity of the Morena/Linda Vista Trolley Station will depend on how many approved units will actually get constructed. Under plans approved by San Diego City Council at the beginning of August, approximately 9,000 residential units could ultimately be built along Morena Boulevard and northeastern Pacific Beach.

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