

# Social Equity Through Transit-Oriented Communities

Written by: Elise Puritz, Business Development Manager - Housing Studio, HED

Transit-Oriented Communities (TOC) zoning ordinances often incentivize affordable housing development near rail lines, bus stations and transit stops in exchange for expedited processing, density bonuses and parking reductions. In addition to encouraging forward-thinking development, these communities can provide a boost toward upward mobility for underserved populations.

While legislation alone cannot solve the complex issues of socioeconomic and racial disparities, TOCs have the potential to narrow the equity gap in education, employment and healthcare by providing housing in close proximity to transportation and services.

“Serving as a catalyst for introducing affordable housing to communities, transit-oriented developments are successful when they respect and contribute to the context of the local neighborhood and framework of city goals,” said Otis Odell, Principal and National Housing Studio Leader with HED’s Los Angeles office. “TOCs provide a unique opportunity to support individuals and families of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, which strengthens neighborhoods through diversity.”

When centered around public transit, inclusionary developments even the playing field for individuals who are unable to drive for physical or financial reasons, and also address air quality disparities. More than 18.7 million people in the United States with incomes meeting the federal poverty definition live in counties that received an F grade for ozone, short-term or year-round particle pollution, all of which impact lung development, susceptibility to infections and cardiovascular function, according to the American Lung Association State of the Air report ([Source 1](#); [Source 2](#)).

An effective TOC limits the need for passenger vehicles, reducing traffic congestion and empowering residents to choose from walking, biking and public transit to achieve their mobility requirements.

“With infill development sites, the number of units built is constrained by the number of parking spaces created,”

said Jesse Slansky, President & CEO of West Hollywood Community Housing Corporation (WHCHC), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit affordable housing developer. “The TOC program can provide parking reduction or parking elimination, which gives developers the flexibility of parking to best fit the project’s needs.”

“One of the costliest portions of a housing development is the construction of the parking garage,” said Jewelle Kennedy, Developer with Ensemble Real Estate Solutions & Investments. “TOC parking benefits can help alleviate some of the cost burden on developers while bringing housing to the community.” Kennedy added that coupling a TOC with a joint public/private sector implementation of Transportation Demand Management (TDM) can improve mobility by offering transit passes, rideshare programs and other benefits to residents of TOC developments. In the Koreatown neighborhood of Los Angeles, California, WHCHC’s 41-unit Mariposa Lily development will soon be underway to transform a former vacant city-owned lot into housing for previously homeless individuals and families who make 15% to 60% of Los Angeles County’s area median income (AMI).

“Having the stability of a safe, quality, affordable home is life-changing,” said Slansky. “As neighborhoods are improved and revitalized, one of the unintended consequences is the displacement of residents. Affordable housing is one way to combat this [displacement] and help community members remain in their neighborhoods.”

The strong demand for affordable housing near transit is evidenced by an overwhelming number of resident applications. In January 2021, WHCHC opened Elden Elms, a 93-unit Koreatown development for families making up to 60% AMI and formerly homeless individuals. Over 2,750 applications were received.

“Affordable housing takes a rare combination of political will, community support and financing,” Slansky said. “When you have all three, this allows developers to make a big impact toward addressing the housing crisis.”