

3-2017

## Metropolitan Centers Mean Smart Growth

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### Recommended Citation

Richard Margerum, Rebecca Lewis and Keith Bartholomew. Metropolitan Centers Mean Smart Growth. NITC Project Brief, Project Number 2016-761. Portland, OR: Transportation Research and Education Center (TREC), 2017.

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## METROPOLITAN CENTERS MEAN SMART GROWTH

*NITC researchers examine the planning processes leading to high-density metropolitan centers as a smart growth solution.*

### The Issue

Across the United States, local governments and state agencies in metropolitan regions make a range of land use and transportation decisions that have cumulative impacts such as: increasing congestion, rising infrastructure costs, decreasing air quality, loss of open space, and increases in greenhouse gas emissions. Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) are federally established organizations serving larger metropolitan regions that are required by law and regulation to carry out certain transportation planning and coordination responsibilities. In response to concerns about the lack of transportation and land use integration, many MPOs have developed voluntary regional visioning processes that examine scenarios and regional goals and objectives.

In this study, a multidisciplinary team from the University of Oregon and the University of Utah examined regional metropolitan center programs and policies in the Salt Lake City and Denver regions. The goal of the study was to examine this topic on two levels. First, to learn how and why local governments have adopted the concepts of metropolitan centers over time and the related supporting and constraining factors. Second, to understand how demographics, land use, and transportation choices have changed over time in the designated centers.

### The Research

NITC researchers Richard Margerum and Rebecca Lewis of the University of Oregon and Keith Bartholomew of the University of Utah evaluated the planning process surrounding metropolitan centers in the regions

### THE ISSUE

MPOs across the United States are encouraging high-density development to address congestion.

### THE RESEARCH

Researchers studied urban centers in Denver and Salt Lake City to learn:

- What incentivizes local governments to encourage high-density urban development;
- What features these centers have in common;
- How the programs and policies around them have evolved over time.

### IMPLICATIONS

This study offers insights into regional vision influence on local planning and the opportunities and constraints facing centers.

*Photo: City Creek Center, a mixed-use development in Salt Lake City, Utah*

of Denver and Salt Lake City. Both of the case study regions have adopted voluntary regional policies for promoting smarter growth, and they rely on regional consensus and collaboration rather than a state growth management framework.

Denver and Salt Lake City offer an interesting context for this work, because they typify some of the current challenges and future potential opportunities facing metropolitan regions, including rapid growth, air quality concerns, low-density urban form, and a significant investment in mass transit. Across both regions, there is increasing use of the concept of metropolitan centers, including urban centers and transit-oriented development.

The Denver metropolitan region has included the concept as part of its regional plan since 2000 and included it in its transportation funding criteria since 2008. In the Salt Lake City area, a regional vision of centers did not emerge until 2005 and was not part of transportation funding criteria until 2015. There has also been gradual change in the vision of these centers over time. They have evolved from centers of single-use activity (such as employment or retail) to mixed-use centers offering more urban amenities.

This evolution is occurring more quickly in some cities than others and, in general, cities in the Denver region are further along than the Salt Lake City region. For many jurisdictions, transit investment is the important catalyst to initiate this transformation, although some planners argued this could occur in areas without transit.

## Implications

Although centers have had a mixed response in both metropolitan regions, there is a significant increase in the development of mixed-use amenity centers,

Denver Region	Population (2012 Census)	Location: Type
Denver	604,356	Central: Central City
Aurora	326,249	Southeast: Inner-ring suburb
Arvada	106,965	Northwest: Outer-ring suburb
Westminster	106,750	Northwest: Outer-ring suburb
Thornton	118,747	North: Outer-ring suburb
Centennial	106,114	Southeast: Outer-ring suburb
Lone Tree	10,941	South: Outer-ring suburb
Greenwood Village	13,932	South Central: Inner-ring suburb
Lakewood	143,496	West: Inner-ring suburb
Englewood	30,565	South: Inner-ring suburb
Salt Lake City Region	Population (2014 Census)	Location: Type
Salt Lake City	189,267	Central: Central City
Clearfield	30,484	Northwest: Outer-ring suburb
Lehi	56,275	South: Outer-ring suburb
Murray	48,822	South: Inner-ring urban
Pleasant View	8,948	Northwest: Standalone rural
Sandy	91,148	South: Outer-ring urban
South Jordan	62,781	Southwest: Outer-ring suburban

### Case Study Cities

This graph shows the 10 case study cities near Denver and seven case study cities near Salt Lake City that were analyzed in the report, along with their location types.

most of which are focused around transit. These locations are likely to have the biggest regional benefits to housing, transportation and land use, and according to researchers, should be the highest priority for regional policies and incentives.

Market forces also play a significant role in driving new development in both regions. The market demand is for a more urban living experience with access to amenities and services. MPOs may be able to capitalize on this trend by providing analysis and evaluation of market demands, working with developers and housing organizations to identify key factors necessary to support investment, sharing case studies from other regions that highlight trends and projects, and offering grants to support planning in locations likely to attract this kind of development.

## PROJECT INFORMATION

**TITLE:** Metropolitan Centers: Evaluating local implementation of regional plans and policies

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**PROJECT NUMBER:** 2016-761

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**MORE INFORMATION**  
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