Metropolitan Centers Mean Smart Growth

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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.
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, 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.