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New Transit Developments: A Double-Edged Sword

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NEW TRANSIT INVESTMENTS: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Researchers analyze the projected impacts of a proposed transit investment on affordability and mobility in a Southeast Portland corridor.

The Issue

New transit service often spurs new development. As transit makes an area more accessible, it becomes a more attractive place for investors to build. This new investment, however, can create serious housing problems for the very residents who depend most on transit: lower-income households and people of color. Lisa Bates and Aaron Golub of Portland State University led a research project to study the intended and unintended costs and benefits of a new transit investment on the diverse communities of East Portland, many already under stress from existing development and gentrification pressures. The final report offers an analysis of the planning of a new Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) infrastructure in East Portland, crossing several neighborhoods in different stages of gentrification along the Powell-Division corridor. Transit use for commuting is higher in the study corridor than in surrounding areas, and car ownership in the corridor is far lower than the national average. The research aims to improve understanding of the transportation access and housing impacts of a new BRT system and to shape the planning discussion to increase benefits and reduce harms for affected communities.

The Research

For both transit and housing impacts, the researchers concentrated on three questions: 1) How does the new transit service differentially affect specific populations of equity concern? 2) How does the new transit service differentially affect residents of neighborhoods across a spectrum of gentrification risk? 3) How does the new transit service differentially affect these populations depending on which kinds of neighborhoods they live in? The study found that housing needs along the Powell-Division corridor are

THE ISSUE

New transit investments are a double-edged sword: they improve mobility, but may spur gentrification and displacement if affordable housing is lost.

THE RESEARCH

Researchers asked:

- How does the proposed new service affect groups of equity concern?
- How does it affect residents of areas at risk for gentrification?
- How does it differently affect people depending on their neighborhood?

IMPLICATIONS

They concluded that if equity planning principles are applied, the project could bring benefits to low-income residents and workers in the corridor.

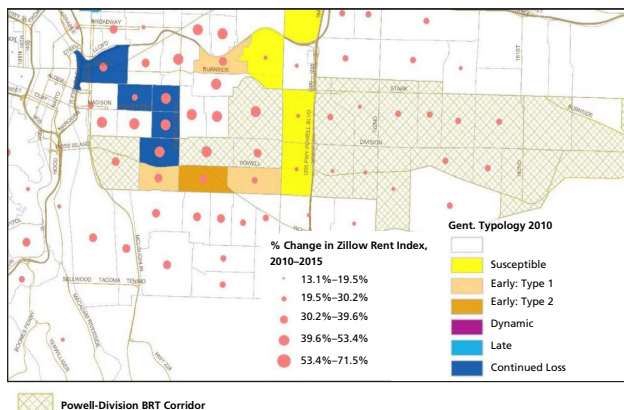
Photo: A TriMet bus stops to pick up passengers on Southeast Powell Boulevard in Portland, Oregon; an area that will be affected by the new transit project

already substantial, even before construction of new transit infrastructure. Powell-Division households are likely to be at least somewhat dependent on transit to get around, and are already significantly pressured by housing prices: households making 30-50 percent of the area's median family income are the most housing cost-burdened (meaning they pay more than 30 percent of their monthly income on housing). Moreover, rental units affordable to that income range are very likely to be leased by higher-income households.

To understand how the Powell-Division BRT proposal will serve different populations, the researchers compared their travel needs with the transportation services delivered by the proposed investments. They examined the current commute patterns of residents and the potential new job locations that would be made more accessible by the BRT system. While low-income workers who work along the corridor stand to benefit from the transit improvements, those who live along it tend to work in very dispersed locations, and need additional improvements, like added north-south connections to the BRT, to realize any benefits. Higher-income residents who live along the corridor will also be well served by the new system, as they will probably require, on average, fewer transfers to reach their final work destinations. With attention to improved connections throughout East Portland, both groups stand to benefit from the BRT investment.

Implications

By studying transit and housing together, researchers hoped to identify potential displacement effects from the transit project. However, they concluded that the already existing housing needs and displacement trends are a priority to consider first. Problems related to the lack of affordable housing are particularly intense in communities of color, immigrant families, people with disabilities and extremely low-income households. Looking at



2010 gentrification stage, with rent increases from 2010-2015

This map shows the stage of gentrification of each segment in 2010, and rent increases from 2010-2015. Areas closest to downtown Portland are more subject to rent increase and displacement.

the area through an equity lens, planners have the opportunity to use the new bus service plan as an opportunity to open a discussion about neighborhoods and their needs. Bates and Golub conclude that the BRT project could provide benefits to low-income residents if planners leverage this public investment for additional transit connectivity and housing resources. Planners need to consider the cumulative impacts of existing inequalities being exacerbated by new infrastructures. The problem of housing vulnerability and lack of access to opportunity is not caused by this project alone, and the project may have the potential to alleviate housing vulnerability and lack of access. Paying close attention to existing affordable housing and the additional commuting needs of low income workers in the corridor can help planners ensure that public investment has equitable benefits.

PROJECT INFORMATION

TITLE: Planning ahead for livable communities along the Powell-Division BRT: neighborhood conditions and change

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