

Urban rail: — new engine for development

Richmond, B.C., makes the most of new Canada Line with 'mini-villages' for residents, shoppers and employers

Special to The Globe and Mail
Tuesday, Sep. 29, 2009



Vancouver's plush new \$2-billion transit line, the first rapid-transit link between a Canadian city and its airport, is so popular with the public that thousands waited on the streets on opening day in August just to try it out, while 80,000 a day have been riding it since.

What's less visible to the naked eye is the Canada Line ride that municipalities, landowners and property developers hope to take by developing areas around new stations in Richmond, Vancouver and the airport's Sea Island.

"With the Canada Line coming, it was not business as usual. We knew that," says Terry Crowe, the manager of policy planning in the suburb of Richmond south of Vancouver, which launched an aggressive initiative five years ago to redesign its city around the five transit stations in preparation for new development.

When additional plans become reality, thousands more residents, shoppers and employees will be clustered around those stations in developments that have been designed to mesh with the 19-kilometre line that links the Vancouver waterfront and central Richmond — with a spur line to the Vancouver International Airport.

In planning lingo, this is known as "transit-oriented development."

There are already signs of that

coming boom. In Vancouver, development company PCI is working on a project near the Marine Drive station that, at this point, includes two residential towers (one of them rental apartments), a cineplex, and a shopping and office complex. At the Templeton station on Sea Island, airport authorities planned from the beginning to create a station that would eventually have a 750,000-square-foot office complex built around it, along with a hotel and conference space.

"The market timing will be determined by our partnership," said Ray Segat, the director of business development for the airport. "But what a good example of how the Canada Line can be used in different ways."

In Richmond, a Malaysian developer is working on a project near the Brighthouse and Lansdowne stations that will replace a car dealership with a massive five-tower residential development with a community centre and satellite university campus — exactly the kind of development Richmond was trying to encourage.

Those kinds of developments are especially likely as metropolitan rapid-transit lines extend farther out to suburban, low-density areas, which is typical of airport lines. Landowners and

builders will have more incentive to develop because of the significant increase in land values around certain stations. The City of Vancouver, which agreed to put up \$27-million to build the station at the Olympic village, is counting on that kind of increase from the land it owns around that station to cover those costs as it's developed.

Those new multiple-use mini-villages around lines are also typical of a general change in transit-line planning.

"You used to look at where the population centres were and then you linked to them," says Gary Andrishak, the IBI Group consultant hired by Richmond to help plan around the stations.

"Now, it's as important to look at a map and look to where you have opportunities, look at the vacant spaces where you can say, 'I can get 10,000 residents in here.'" As rosy as all of that sounds, the Canada Line experience is also showing that transit lines — even those that link downtown to an airport — do not automatically spur instant development around stations.

Both Richmond city council and the airport jumped at the chance to foster development around their stations. Richmond took \$1.5-million that the Canada Line project offered for planning to

come up with a vision of dense “transit villages” around each station. The airport deliberately asked for a station with empty land around it in order to create a development opportunity.

But Vancouver only just approved a work program in July, seven years after discussions about the line began, to start planning around its stations, a move that has baffled many in the region – not least the Canada Line office that gave Vancouver the same \$1.5-million that Richmond was offered. The one project that is being contemplated now, near Marine Drive, was not supported by the planning department and has moved ahead only because city councillors decided to override the department in favour of encouraging transit-oriented development.

City planners have defended that delay, saying they were too busy with other major projects on the go, the Olympics not being the least of them. And planning director Brent Toderian did not recommend the Marine Gateway project because it was on industrial land that the city is trying to preserve.

But even when city governments are encouraging development around stations, it's not just any development.

“The transit plaza should become the Italian piazza of the 21st century,” Mr. Andrishak says. That means a mix of many uses. “A transit village is where you can live, shop, learn, play and work.”

In Richmond, city planners had originally thought of allowing for 156,000 residents around the stations by 2021, a tripling of the

40,000 now there.

“But we realized that would not allow enough space for parks or jobs,” Mr. Crowe said. So the residential number has been dropped to 120,000 in order to make room for 80,000 jobs and other needed uses.

Similarly in Vancouver, one project built in advance of the Canada Line opening, the Crossroads complex at the busy Cambie and Broadway intersection, had been originally planned with many more of the condos that developers in this city see as the best guarantee of return on their money.

“The developers didn't want office. They were making the case that condos were more sustainable because they'd provide riders for the line,” says Lon LaClaire, the city's director of transportation planning.

But his department did the analysis and proved that office space generates far more transit trips per square foot of space – 10 times more. So the city, which has considerable power to shape developments through its discretionary zoning system, demanded more office space.

Next stop: Toronto, Montreal

While people complain that Vancouver has been slow off the mark to plan for development around its transit stations, the same can't be said for Toronto and Montreal.

Both cities have active plans for downtown-to-airport rapid-transit links on their books for construction some time over the next five years, and both are already taking a close look at planning around the stations for

those new lines.

“At all the stations along the Eglinton Crosstown, we will be intensifying,” says Rod McPhail, the director of transportation planning for Toronto. (The city is preparing for a 31-kilometre, \$4.6-billion line from Kennedy station to Pearson airport with a completion date of 2016.) In order to encourage that intense development, Toronto is going to do more advance work around each station than is typical for other kinds of neighbourhoods.

“We asked the development community what works against us for intensifying on the main corridors. They said, ‘You do nice work with your studies, but then we have to take our chances with zoning on an individual site.’” To overcome that barrier, the city isn't just going to come up with a conceptual plan for each station neighbourhood, but will do the zoning work in advance of any specific application. As people have been saying in Vancouver, Mr. McPhail made the point that it costs taxpayers billions of dollars to build transit lines, so they need to be supported by dense development around them.

In Montreal, city planners are also looking at development around their planned transit line to the airport. The city is just going through the process of deciding whether Canadian Pacific or Canadian National will get the contract for the line, so details are under wraps.

But, says city spokesman Gonzalo Nunez, an extensive study is under way on the potential for urban development around the existing and projected train stations.