

Walking Through a Couple of Successful TODs

Joe Stowers September 26, 2010

Saturday morning Mark Looney led a small group of Task Force members and other interested participants in the Task Force process in a very well-organized 3-hour walking tour of the Ballston and Virginia Square TODs and their neighboring transition zones.

I think we all appreciated Mark's generosity in doing this so effectively and felt that we gained a lot of understanding of how a good TOD can and should work 25 years after a Metro rail station begins operation. We also want to share some of that experience with others involved in the Task Force process.

Here are some of the most important reactions I would like to share:

- Ballston's highest densities (4-6 FARs) are within two blocks of the Metro station and most of that is concentrated within one block.
- Arlington has open space park standards that may be too high in terms of acres for TOD areas. Some of the parks appear to be underutilized.
- Ballston has some shortcomings compared to Reston Town Center:
 - Retail streets appear not to have not been identified in the planning of the TOD. Some retail is scattered along several streets. It would probably be helpful for our Task Force to offer suggestions to improve on this by advising which streets might be best for concentrating retail. However, we also noted that of the outlying retail locations appear to be good locations for things like mattress and furniture stores -- stores requiring more space for display and lower density of both shoppers and sales workers -- and presumably requiring lower prices for space.
 - Design standards for different classes of streets in the TOD areas appear not to have not been well-defined or implemented.
 - Traffic calming appears to have been only half achieved for through streets. Although I would not suggest that these 2 TODs be a model for traffic calming in Reston's TODs, Ballston has certainly done a better job of traffic calming than anywhere in Reston.
- Ballston cannot be compared at all to Town Center in terms of residential-commercial balance.
 - It has much more highway capacity than our Town Center due to the numerous pre-existing parallel through collector and arterial streets.

-- Residential appears to be a higher proportion of development throughout the Virginia Square area. However, unlike the mile or more spacing between our 3 stations, Virginia Square station is only ½ mile away from the Ballston station -- well within easy walking distance of the much greater job concentration in Ballston's TOD.

-- Virginia Square is home to the GMU law school campus and also provides extensive housing for students and people employed on the campus.

-- Heidi's observation that Wiehle's TOD might resemble Virginia Square's is worth sharing with others on the Task Force.

- It has taken about 25 years since the Ballston Metro station opened to reach a level of development roughly comparable in overall development scale to our much more spread out and much lower density Reston Town Center.