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Transit-Oriented Communities bill would create more affordable and sustainable neighborhoods, with few zoning changes for Seattle

Futurewise and the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance (WLIHA) deeply regret the exceedingly untrue attacks on our proposed legislation in *Futurewise Bill would force neighborhoods to accommodate massive increases in density around “transit stations”* by John Fox and Carolee Colter, recently printed in Capitol Hill Times, North Seattle Herald Outlook and South Seattle Beacon. The “Creating Transit-Oriented Communities” legislation (TOC bill), a legislative priority for both the Washington State environmental community and the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance, amends the Growth Management Act to consider climate impacts of land use and transportation policies and provide more affordable housing in growing cities. Its intention is to strengthen the regulatory framework to ensure that our cities remain sustainable and affordable for future generations.

Futurewise is a statewide nonprofit organization that promotes healthy communities while protecting farmland, forests, and shorelines. We hold that accommodating growth in cities near transit while protecting our working farms and forests is vital to meeting state greenhouse gas reduction requirements and protecting Puget Sound. Furthermore, because low and moderate income individuals and families are most dependent on transit, it is critical from both environmental and social equity standpoints that transit station areas provide housing and job opportunities to meet the needs of a wide spectrum of income levels.

WLIHA is a statewide coalition that works to ensure that everyone in Washington has the opportunity to live in a safe, decent, affordable home. We hold that transit-oriented development may facilitate livable communities, rich with diversity and character, while taking steps to reduce climate change. To achieve this goal, new development must include housing for people at all income levels. Without careful oversight, we will exacerbate transportation challenges by pushing lower income residents further from their jobs and services. The inclusion of affordable housing is essential to creating successful transit-oriented communities.

In response to the Fox/Colter article, we emphasize that the TOC bill would have minimal, if any, impact on the zoning of most future light rail stations in Seattle.

The TOC bill addresses allowed net density, not current use. The Fox/Colter article references the density of *current land use* (what is on the ground today), but neglects to mention that the TOC bill deals with *allowed net* density and does not force any change to current land use. The bill requires that zoning in half-mile radius high-capacity transit station areas have an *allowed net* density (the maximum density allowed under zoning, not including public rights-of-way) of 50 dwelling units per acre, although the current use in most areas would continue to be substantially less than that. Most future Seattle light rail station areas already have sufficient zoning in place to meet this threshold.

For example, the current land use density of Southeast Seattle may be four units per acre. However, even in a typical single-family zone the *allowed net* density is actually 17 units per acre (8.5 single-family homes + 8.5 detached accessory dwelling units). Multi-family low and mid-rise zones in Southeast Seattle can accommodate 100-300 units per acre. The many L-4 zones in the Hope VI developments can accommodate 72 units per acre (109 units, if low-income). These developments are already zoned at much higher densities than that called for in the TOC bill.

Second, the TOC bill addresses average density, and would not require changes to single-family zones. Local communities should decide what shape density should take. An entire station area zoned at L-3 (allowing 54 units per acre in three-story structures) would meet the threshold. However, if a community wanted to preserve lower-density zones at the periphery of a station area, the threshold could be met by off-setting the low density zones with higher density zones closer to the core—such as do the many NC-65 sites that can accommodate over 200 units per acre adjacent to the future Mount Baker and Othello stations.

What *will* the TOC bill do? Because the Seattle station areas strive to be livable and walkable, without the park-and-rides found in other cities, it is imperative that land use, housing and transportation policies allow more people the opportunity to live and work in communities in which they will not need to rely on a car to access homes, jobs, and services. We therefore chose the 50 unit threshold because it is the tipping point at which more trips are taken by walking or transit than by car.¹ The half-mile radius was selected because it is the distance up to which most people are willing to walk to access high-capacity transit.²

Therefore a 502-acre station area (approximately 376 *net* acres) would accommodate 18,800 units. Full build-out would take 50-100 years, at which point the Seattle region is expected to grow by several million additional residents. Because buildings built today may be on the ground for at least 50-100 years, our land use policy must think equally long-term. For example, the Capitol Hill and Northgate station areas have already been zoned for decades at densities many times higher than those called for in the TOC bill. Although it will be many more decades before those communities are built-out, it is important that the zoning considers long-term projections.

¹ Institute of Transportation Engineers. 1989. *A Toolbox for Alleviating Traffic Congestion*. ITE Publ. No. IR-054A page 97

² Dittmar, H., and G. Ohland, eds. *The New Transit Town: Best Practices in Transit-Oriented Development*. 2004. Island Press. Washington, D.C. p. 120.

Not all cities with planned high capacity transit are zoned to accommodate this level of growth, and the TOC bill will provide direction for appropriate upzones. Even in Seattle however, the infrastructure and amenities necessary to support a growing, livable community are often not in place. The TOC bill requires cities to plan for these amenities and provide programs to meet housing needs. In addition, a complementary bill will provide funding mechanisms to help finance infrastructure and housing investments in higher density areas.

Article co-author John Fox has met with Futurewise and WLIHA staff to discuss the intent of our legislation. WLIHA is in the process of adding a housing element that will address many of the suggestions laid out in the article, including ways of creating a net increase of housing affordable to low and moderate income in these areas and require that units remain affordable well into the future. Fox's mischaracterization of the proposal is very unfortunate, his accusations regarding Futurewise's motives are outlandish and defamatory—and serve to undermine not only sustainability efforts, but also the affordable housing outcomes for which he purports to advocate. The TOC bill will be a win for communities and a win for the environment, and Futurewise and WLIHA are proud to work together for its passage.