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Planning for Passenger Rail in Small Cities and Towns

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Abstract
Projects to expand the passenger rail network in the United States will connect major metropolitan areas over long distances, travelling through smaller communities along the way. Transit-oriented development (TOD) is a concept for planning around stations to support transit and allow the development of dense, mixed use, walkable places. TOD literature focuses largely on developing around transit in metropolitan areas. Guidance for small towns and cities in rural areas is lacking.

This thesis compares best planning practices from TOD literature to the planning practices of small cities located in rural areas of New England where new passenger rail service or a new station has been developed in the last fifteen years. The research focuses on planning efforts in the area within a half mile of the station. Two indicators, property values and ridership, were also used to determine if the service has impacted the area surrounding the station. The goal of the research is to determine

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how planning for rural stations differs from planning for TOD in metropolitan areas.

Findings show that many of the best planning practices from the literature were applied in the small cities, though there were a few important differences. The station was included as part of broader development plans, rather than acting as a central focus of the plan. Additionally, it was found that stations should incorporate multiple uses to create activity throughout the day since train service is less frequent than in an urban setting.

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