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## After Decades of Sprawl, Density Comes to Denver

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Last week transportation officials in Denver [made a trial run](#) of the new West Rail Line — a 12-mile, \$707 million light rail line expected to serve some 20,000 riders a day. The "W" line holds great promise for Denver's western corridor (except, perhaps, for too much emphasis on [park-and-ride facilities](#)), but it has even greater significance for the city at large. It's the first rail line to be finished of the massive "[FasTracks](#)" regional transit program that's set to reshape the entire metropolitan area.

FasTracks is a multi-billion dollar regional plan financed by a 4-cent sales tax approved by voters 57-43 back in 2004. The program aims to expand transit service in three existing corridors, create new service in six other corridors, and develop Denver's Union Station into a multi-modal regional transportation hub. (It also wants to maintain [transportation equity](#).) But FasTracks is more than a transit plan: it's also a land use

initiative with an intense focus on transit-oriented development and an ultimate goal of transforming Denver into a more sustainable city.

So far it's doing just that. In a recent [special issue](#) of the journal *Cities*, geographers Keith Ratner of Salem State University and Andrew Goetz of the University of Denver report that transit-oriented development in the FasTracks era has already had a measurable effect on the character of the city. After analyzing TOD data from around the city, Ratner and Goetz conclude that increased density near transit stations — one of the primary objectives of the regional plan — is "clearly evident":

While Denver still remains a relatively low density city that relies heavily on the automobile and highway transportation, there has nevertheless been a clear change in regional policy that is encouraging more transit and higher-density transit-oriented development and that change in policy is having a recognizable impact on Denver's land use and urban form.

Denver's recent success is encouraging for all U.S. metros, largely because the city followed a typical path in the 20th century. During a period of intense sprawl and transit failure, between 1950 and 1990, the city's population density shrank from 4,741 people per square mile to 3,309. Since reversing course in the mid-'90s, however, density is back around 4,000 people per square mile.

Ratner and Goetz attribute much of that change to a successful TOD campaign that focused on five key goals: placing homes, jobs, and retail near transit; creating a mixture of transportation, housing, and shopping options; capturing some of the business value of transit for the city; emphasizing "place-making" strategies; and ensuring that transit stations were entry portals to a truly regional network. From 2000 to 2010, T.O.D. development made up a considerable chunk of all regional development (9 percent of all residential growth, 11 percent of retail, 15 percent of office).

All told, Denver has created some 18,000 residential units, 5.3 million square feet of retail, and 5.4 million square feet of office space within a half mile of transit station, Ratner and Goetz report.

As a result, the transit zones have much greater population and household densities than they did just a decade back. The average population density (*below*) within a half-mile of transit stations is now six times greater than the density in the rest of the region (with density downtown doing even better and doubling the average). Household density near transit stations, meanwhile, is nearly nine times greater than the regional average (with downtown again more than twice as dense still).

**Table 9**

Station type development. Source: Authors' calculations from Denver Regional Council of Governments data.

Area	Population density (Pop per Acre)	Population residential density (Pop per Res Acre)
Downtown Stations	13.01	43.68
Main Street Stations	16.27	22.36
Campus Stations	5.20	19.94
Urban Neighborhood Stations	8.61	17.01
Major Urban Center Stations	3.65	15.71
Commuter Town Center Stations	4.94	14.22
Urban Center Stations	6.25	11.30
All Existing Station Areas	6.43	14.45
Entire Denver Transit Region	0.97	10.26

Now the Denver metro area as a whole still has some ways to go. While 43 percent of downtown commuters now take transit, far exceeding national averages, three-quarters of people in the metro area at large still commute by driving alone, which is no better than the national pace. Meanwhile, sprawl continues to pull at the edges of the city, which is expected to measure 1,106 square miles in 2035 — beyond a boundary set by its regional plan. Still the city's [approach to smart growth](#), anchored by FasTracks, offers a working model for other cities to emulate.