

SCAG Region: Compass Blueprint Case Study

El Monte Transit Village



March 2008

Clockwise from top: Transit Village Logo, from The Titan Group; Rendering of the proposed Rio Paseo in the Transit Village; the current El Monte Transit Center.

Sources: The Titan Group, Strategic Economics, 2008

Center for Transit-Oriented Development



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THE EL MONTE TRANSIT VILLAGE

The City of El Monte is the tenth largest city in Los Angeles County with a population of nearly 114,000. The City of El Monte has worked extensively over the last several decades to revitalize key commercial areas, including Downtown El Monte. This case study focuses on one of the City’s efforts, the El Monte Transit Village, which is located between Downtown El Monte and Interstate 10.

LOCAL CONTEXT

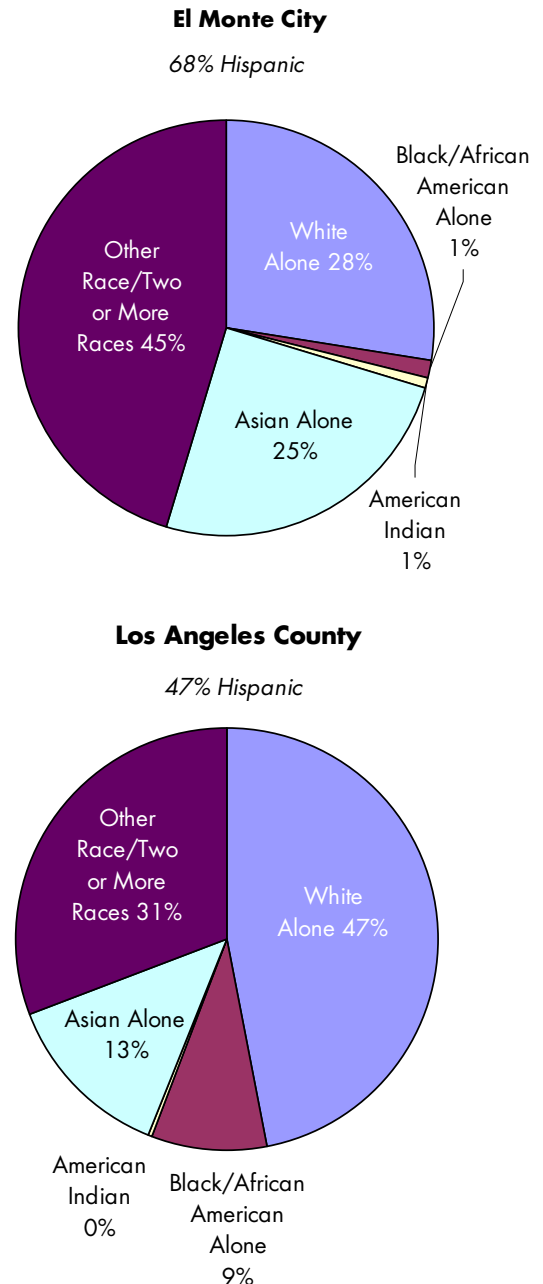
The City of El Monte is located in the central San Gabriel Valley, just to the west of the intersection of Interstates 10 and 605. The San Gabriel Valley represents nearly a cross-section of the regional Los Angeles population in terms of ethnic mix, income mix and jobs. While many consider the San Gabriel Valley to be a suburban feeder for the City of Los Angeles, it in fact accommodates 20 percent of the population of Los Angeles County, and 18 percent of the County’s jobs. Figure 2 shows that while job densities are not quite as high near the City of El Monte as they are in Pasadena or Los Angeles, they are sizable nonetheless.

The City’s location in the region – adjacent to two major freeways and in close proximity to major job centers in Los Angeles and Pasadena as well as jobs throughout the San Gabriel Valley – ensures that residents enjoy shorter than average commutes (27 minutes on average, vs. the regional average of 29 minutes). Moreover, the City is directly connected to Downtown Los Angeles via its Metrolink Station and the El Monte Busway, which provides rapid service via the I-10 corridor.

In 2006, the City of El Monte’s population was 68 percent Hispanic compared with 47 percent in Los Angeles County. Whereas the County’s population was 13 percent Asian in 2006, the City’s population was 25 percent Asian. The City also has a greater share of lower income residents than the County, with 17 percent of individuals earning an income below the poverty level compared with the County’s 15 percent. However, poverty rates decreased significantly from 2000 levels, when 26 percent of the City and 18 percent of the County fell below the poverty line.

One of the challenges facing El Monte in the future is ensuring that local residents can continue to afford to live in the City as new development projects revitalize key commercial areas. The City is in a central regional location, and provides transit access and other public services to those who need them most. Current and future planning efforts are intended to take advantage of the City’s excellent regional access and help to revitalize struggling areas in a way that also serves current local residents.

Figure 1. Distribution of Race, 2006



Source: U.S. Census: American Community Survey

THE TRANSIT VILLAGE PROJECT

In September 2007, the City of El Monte adopted the El Monte Transit Village Specific Plan, with the intention of creating a transit-oriented urban village adjacent to the downtown. The Transit Village in El Monte, CA is located immediately to the southwest of Downtown El Monte, at the intersection of Santa Anita Avenue and Interstate 10. The area currently features a major regional bus hub, and functions as a hub for both local and regional bus service. The El Monte Transit Center is a stop for many buses connecting to Downtown Los Angeles via the El Monte Busway on Interstate 10.

Uses in the 61-acre transit village area presently include the Transit Center and surface parking, storage sites for the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), Pioneer Park and Fletcher Park (City-operated public parks with ball fields and other recreational space), the City Maintenance Yard and Fire Station, and several privately owned parcels with nonresidential uses. In addition to promoting transit-oriented development near the Transit Center, the El Monte Transit Village plans include improving parks and creating a public riverside walk along a portion of the Rio Hondo, which is just to the west of the site.

NEIGHBORHOOD HISTORY

Hailed as the busiest bus station west of Chicago, the El Monte Transit Center serves buses from Foothill Transit, Metro, and Greyhound. The station was built in 1973 along with the 11-mile El Monte Busway that connects to Downtown Los Angeles. The station provides internal bus circulation, and adjacent buildings house subregional Metro offices. Presently there are more than 2,000 park-and-ride spaces in surface lots surrounding the station, though less than half of these are occupied on a typical weekday. As of 2005, an estimated 1,100 riders boarded buses at the El Monte Station each morning, only slightly lower than boarding estimates at the Mission/Meridian Gold Line Light Rail station in South Pasadena. With transfers from one bus to another, an estimated 20,000 riders pass through El Monte each day, making the Transit Center busier than every train station in the LA region except for Union Station.

Transit service was further enhanced at the El Monte Transit Center when Foothill Transit opened its Silver Streak service in March 2007, providing a one-of-a-kind rapid transit link between Montclair and Downtown Los Angeles via Interstate 10. The service offers state-of-the-art technology including on-board GPS to accurately track the location of the buses, free wireless

“We want to build a destination around a transportation hub. The concept is to have housing, entertainment, retail and an open plaza all within walking distance of a transit station.”

- John Leung, President, Titan Group (from San Gabriel Valley Tribune, February 17, 2003)

Figure 3. The El Monte Bus Station



The El Monte Bus Station is a hub for many lines including the Silver Streak Bus Rapid Transit Line, which connects to Downtown Los Angeles via the El Monte Busway on I-10.

service, and digital displays at station stops announcing bus arrival times. The Silver Streak and other bus lines can connect to Downtown Los Angeles in about 15 minutes, only two-thirds of the time it takes to commute by car.

Figure 4. The El Monte Transit Center



The unique rotunda shape of the El Monte bus station was designed in the early 1970's to facilitate easy bus access. Buses from I-10 can directly access the station using an elevated ramp.

Capitalizing on the area's excellent transit service, the goal of the El Monte Transit Village Specific Plan is to create a "regionally significant, mixed use community that integrates public transit, residential, retail, commercial, recreational, and entertainment uses." Planning efforts have involved unique collaborations between public agencies including the City of El Monte, the El Monte Community Redevelopment Agency, Caltrans, and the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Agency (Metro), as well as extensive community outreach.

Efforts to promote transit-oriented development near the bus station were initiated in 1986, when the City entered into an agreement with Caltrans and Metro (then part of the Southern California Regional Transportation District) to study the feasibility of mixed-use development on and near the bus station. The following year, the City established the 212-acre Downtown El Monte Redevelopment Project Area, which included the transit village area. Implementation and planning of the transit village concept were slow to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s, in part due to the recession that hit the Los Angeles area in the early 1990s. Nonetheless the City continued to support the mixed-use concept, referencing it in the 1991 City General Plan.

During the initial 1986 process, the Community Redevelopment Agency purchased a 3-½ acre church property at the corner of Santa Anita Avenue and Interstate 10, and relocated the existing church to another site in the City. When plans for the transit village fell through, the Agency could not afford to continue paying for this costly land acquisition and relocation. Ultimately the Agency sold the site to an auto dealership, which is still an active use today.

The planning process was renewed in 2004 when the El Monte Community Redevelopment Agency was approached by a private property owner / developer known as the Titan Group, who was interested in undertaking a study of the area's development potential. One year later the City created a new agreement with Caltrans and Metro, and initiated the process of creating a transit village specific plan. Over the next several years, the plan would evolve with significant community input and environmental review. In September 2007, the plan and program level Environmental Impact Report were approved by the City Council.

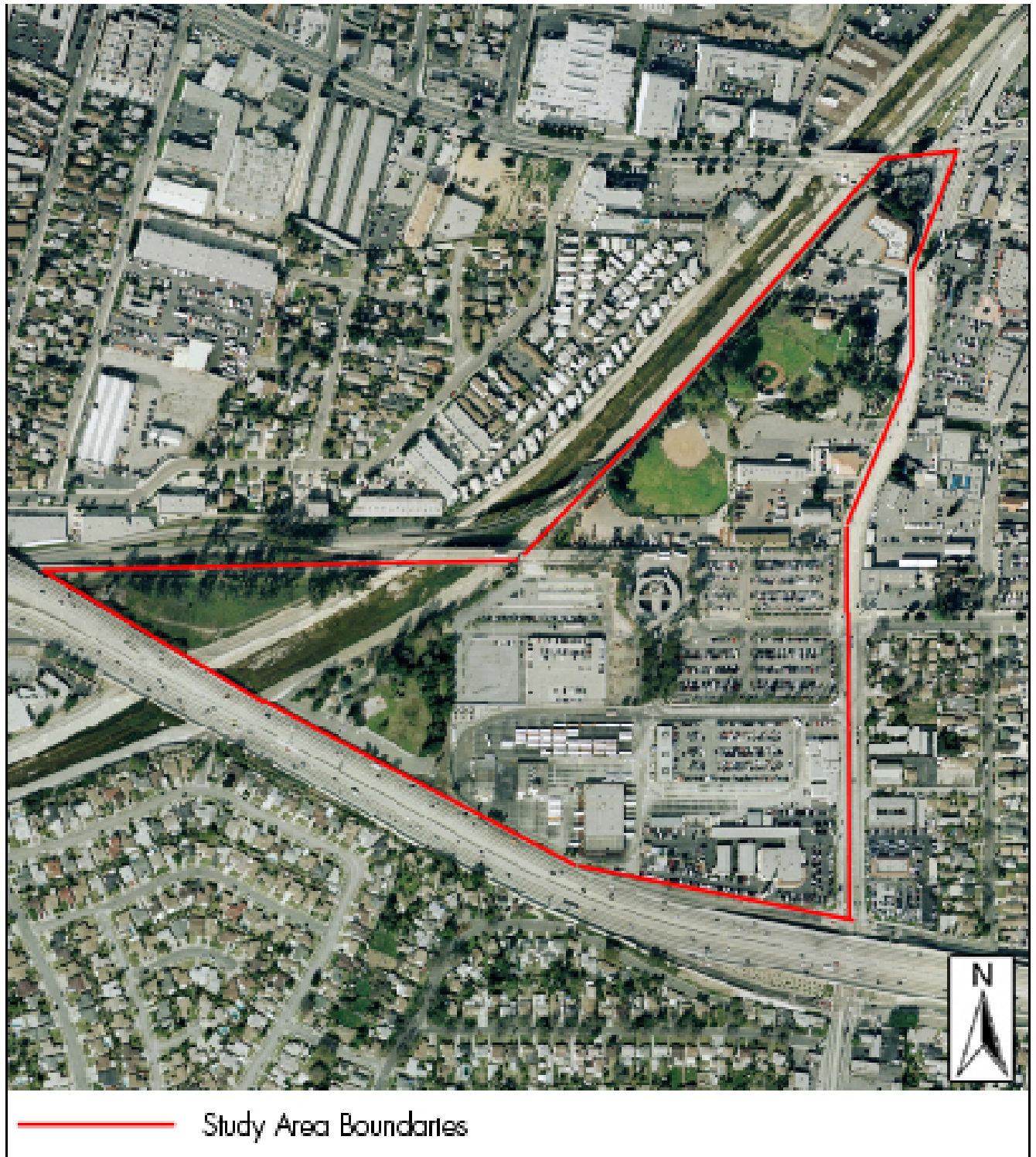
At build-out, the Transit Village Specific Plan could add over 1,800 housing units, 561,000 square feet of retail and a child

SCAG COMPASS DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

In Winter 2006, SCAG awarded the City of El Monte a Demonstration Project grant to assist with economic development strategies and visualization services to supplement efforts already underway for the local General Plan update and the El Monte Transit Village Specific Plan.

The report will be completed in mid 2008.

Figure 5. Aerial View of the El Monte Transit Villaae , 2007



Source: AirPhotoUSA, Spring 2007; study area delineated by Strategic Economics

development center. Public improvements would include enhancing the existing Pioneer and Fletcher Parks, and creating a promenade along the Rio Hondo that would include amenities such as outdoor dining for new restaurants as well as public improvements. Representing nearly one third of the original Downtown Redevelopment Project Area, the Transit Village could have a catalytic effect in revitalizing other, smaller opportunity sites throughout the Downtown.

Plans for the Transit Village have evolved over the last several years. The Titan Group conducted an extensive, year-long community outreach process, which City Staff hail as a success in creating a plan that meets the community’s goals. The community outreach process brought local residents on board with the development concept, and resulted in some significant changes to the assumptions underlying the plan. For example, during the outreach process the community strongly emphasized the importance of keeping at least two ball fields open at all times during the construction process. The developer and City acknowledged this as a priority, resulting in changes to the phasing and design of the Transit Village concept.

Figure 6. Community Outreach

Community Outreach Activities	
Outreach Activity	Outreach Activity Description
1 One-on-One Meetings	Meetings with community leaders
2 Focus Group Meetings	Topic-related meetings with community members
3 Charrette	
4 Elected Official Briefings	Project briefings with elected officials
5 Group Presentations	Presentations to community/civic /business groups
6 Community Events/Festivals	Presentations at community events
7 Community Barbecues	Neighborhood barbecues/meetings in five adjacent neighborhoods
8 Newsletters	Mail distributed to residents

Source: Excerpt from Transit Village Specific Plan

THE COMMUNITY OUTREACH PROCESS

The Titan Group, together with the City of El Monte, undertook a multifaceted community outreach process in order to ensure that their vision for the development corresponded to that of the local residents. One of the key pieces of this process was ensuring that local decision-makers, residents, focus groups, and Staff were comfortable with the intensities of development that were proposed in the Transit Village.

Among the many steps outlined in Figure 6, the Titan Group sought out examples of well-designed projects throughout the Los Angeles region and used these local examples as visuals to help the community understand what development at different densities looked like. Rather than having the community guess at how a 35-unit/acre project differed from a 60-unit/acre project, the Titan Group showed examples of these projects fit in the context of similar older suburban communities. They additionally used both newer and older buildings as examples to show how buildings of the same density looked over time.

FROM VISION TO REALITY

Transit Village Specific Plan

The 2007 Transit Village Specific Plan creates several Sub-Districts within the Village boundaries. These include:

- A *Mixed-Use* Sub-District comprising over 30 acres. This is the focal point for new housing and commercial development, and includes all of the development currently in the planning stages. Homes in this area will be built at 60 units per acre. Other development includes retail, office, hotel, conference facility, a child development center, and 12 acres of parkland. The vision for this plan is to create unique, vibrant pedestrian-oriented areas such as a “Rio Paseo” or riverwalk area that is open to the public for recreational uses, but also enables development to take advantage of the river amenity with outdoor restaurant seating and river views from new homes in the Transit Village.
- A *Transit* Sub-District, which will include the current Transit Center as well as Metro offices and additional structured commuter parking.
- A *River* Sub-District that will be devoted to public and riverside uses such as parkland.

THE MARKET FOR TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT AT EL MONTE TRANSIT CENTER

The development of the Transit Village is yet another illustration that the development community is recognizing – and responding to – major demographic changes throughout the Los Angeles Region. The Titan Group, which has completed numerous other projects throughout El Monte, is highly familiar with the local market. “The San Gabriel Valley is very family oriented,” observed Bart Doyle, COO of the Titan Group, “People grow up here, their parents and grandparents live here.”

Housing at the Transit Village is designed to respond to the need for a wider variety of units serving this multigenerational community. Doyle notes that particularly in this maturing immigrant community, young Latino professionals are looking to return to El Monte several years following college in order to settle down, but cannot find high quality condominiums or townhomes.

On the commercial front, Doyle notes that El Monte has long been underserved, pointing out the lack of even a single chain grocery store in a city of around 115,000 residents. Residents head north to Temple City or Arcadia to purchase general merchandise goods and other basic retail necessities. This “retail leakage” opens up opportunities for typical chain tenants catering to middle-income households. There is no Target, TGI Friday’s or Claim Jumper near El Monte. The Transit Village could change all that.

“You have all of these distinct population segments, and no housing has been produced for any of them.”

- Bart Doyle, Chief Operating Officer, Titan Group



Rendering of the Transit Village by The Titan Group

Planning Timeline:

1986 – Agreement between City, Caltrans, and Southern California RTD to study mixed-use development at station

1987 – El Monte Transit Village area is included in the Downtown El Monte Redevelopment Area

1991 – City General plan consistent with idea of transit village

2004 – Agency approached by a property owner interested in undertaking a new study of the transit village development

2005 – City initiated environmental review of TOD proposal

2006 – City and Agency Renewed Agreement with Caltrans and Metro to study development

2006 – Revisions to plan trigger the need for a new environmental review process

September 2007 – City Council adopts Specific Plan and EIR

March 2008 – City and Redevelopment Agency approve disposition and development agreement with the Titan Group

A *Gateway* Sub-District which is the current site of an auto dealership. Presently, the City is evaluating the option of a right-of-way in this area that could provide direct bus access to the station via Brockway Ave. This could reduce the need for bus access via Santa Anita Ave., thus reducing congestion at major intersections adjacent to the Transit Village.

Affordable Housing

At a minimum, 15 percent of the units in the Transit Village will be affordable to moderate income households, per Redevelopment requirements. However, a key concept of the Specific Plan is to make the Transit Village units available to all income levels, and it is the goal of the City to make at least 20 percent of the units affordable. Such a level of affordability will require a strong future financial commitment by the City or Community Redevelopment Agency. While funds have not been secured, but with the understanding that this will require a future financial commitment from the City / Agency. The Agency is intending to use affordable housing set aside funds from this and other project areas in order to ensure the affordability of a portion of the project.

Additionally, the Specific Plan states that at least 20 percent of the units in the development will be rental, thus ensuring that the development will include a variety of unit types. This was a particularly critical goal during the ownership-housing boom that overtook the region throughout the planning process.

Parking Requirements

To the extent possible, the parking requirements seek to encourage a “shared parking” strategy, where office and transit riders occupy spaces during one part of the day, and commercial, entertainment, and residential users occupy spaces the rest of the time. Over 8,700 underground parking spaces will be phased in over time to serve the Transit Village, of which about 2,000 will be designated for Transit Center commuters.

Phasing

Opening up sites for development will require strategically planned relocation of many existing public uses on the Transit Village site. The City and developer will not only need to relocate uses on their own land, including public water wells and the City’s Public Works yard, but will also need to provide replacement parking for Caltrans sites, keep two public ballparks in operational use throughout the development process, and consider the changing market conditions for various uses throughout the process. Timing of development will be of critical importance to ensure its success.

One of the next steps will be to consolidate 794 commuter parking spaces in a structure in order to free up the 5 acre

Caltrans site that sits between Santa Anita Avenue and the bus station. Caltrans policy requires that all parking spaces be replaced prior to the construction of new uses on the site. This is a key site in the development phasing process because it is highly visible and accessible from Santa Anita, and it is immediately adjacent to the station. Similar relocation issues, and their financing plans, will be a major consideration in the development phasing process.

Financing Infrastructure Costs

Implementing the newly approved specific plan will pose new, but surmountable challenges for the City of El Monte and the developer, the greatest of which are the costs associated with the relocation of many public uses as well as other improvements such as:

- Construction of a 794 space commuter parking garage on City property in order to free up a five-acre Caltrans parcel for development;
- Relocation and improvement of City of El Monte water wells and water treatment facilities currently occupying part of the site;
- Relocation of the City’s Public Works yard;
- Improvements to public parks;
- Restoration of the Rio Hondo;
- Cleanup of contaminated sites; and
- Street and bus right-of-way improvements, creating a more pedestrian-friendly street grid.

The City and developer are pursuing multiple financing options to help cover these tremendous infrastructure costs, including:

Redevelopment Agency Funds

The El Monte Community Redevelopment Agency will dedicate up to \$17 million in tax increment bonds to finance infrastructure improvements. The Agency is not directly subsidizing the development project.

California Transit Village Development Planning Act (1994)

The City and Agency hope to take advantage of the 1994 Transit Village Development Planning Act, in order to secure State and Federal funding for specified improvements that will enhance the pedestrian and bicycle connections throughout the Specific Plan area. This Act prioritizes state transportation funds for transit stations that have plans to incorporate high-density residential and mixed uses in adjacent areas.

Proposition 1B, 1C

Propositions 1B and 1C, which were approved by California voters in 2006, provide State bond funds to go towards infrastructure improvements and encourage infill development. A portion of these funds are allocated as grants to local governments throughout the State of California.

Figure 7. Pioneer Park

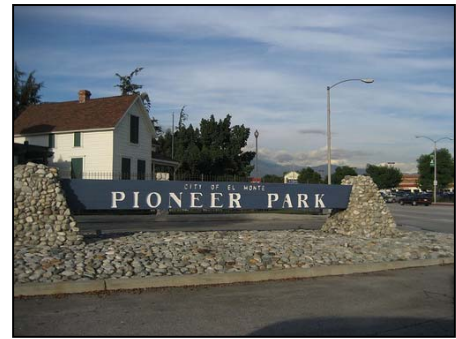


Figure 8. Pioneer Park Ball Field



Keeping two ball fields operational is a major priority during the phasing and development of the specific plan.

Figure 9. Transit Village Concept Plan

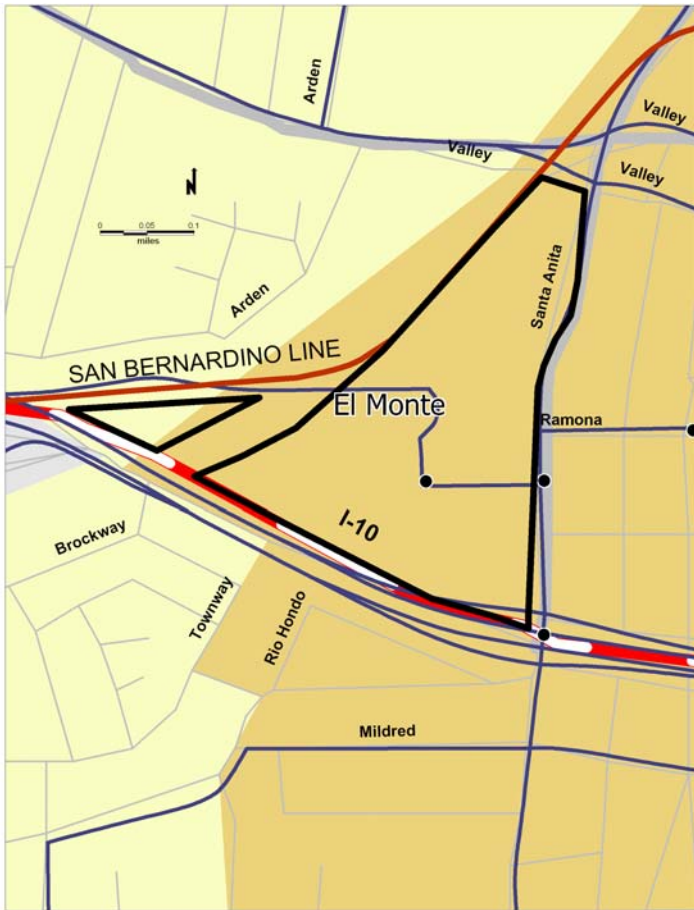


Development plans will require many infrastructure improvements, including extending public services into the plan area (such as the existing wastewater lines, shown here)

Source: Excerpt from Transit Village Specific Plan

MEASURING SMART GROWTH: HOW DOES THE EL MONTE TRANSIT VILLAGE COMPARE?

Figure 10. Housing Costs as a Percent of Income

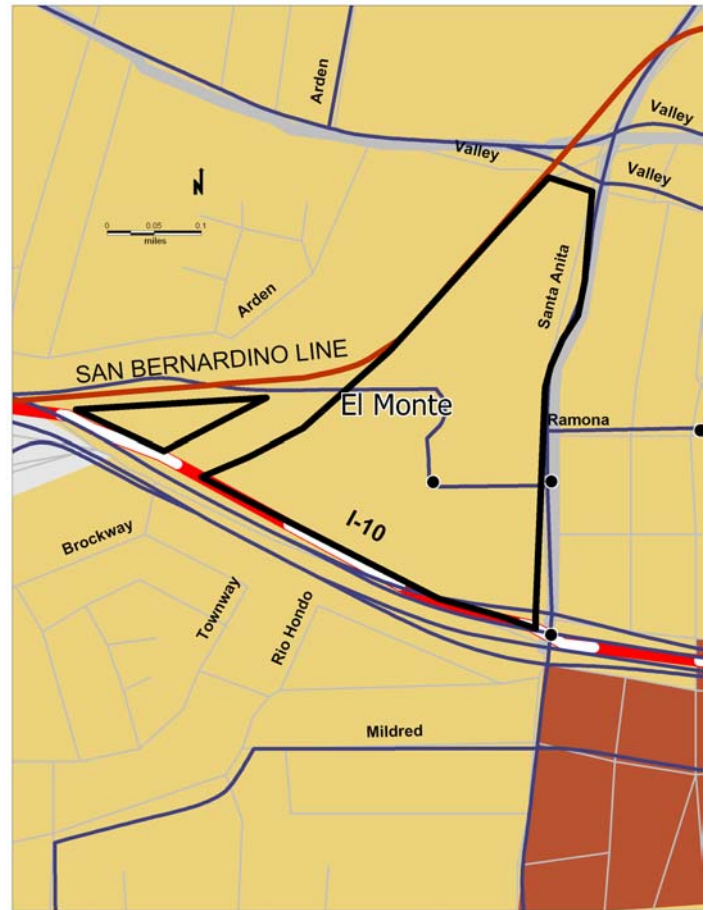


Housing Costs as Percent of Income

- 0 to 20%
- 20 to 30%
- 30 to 40%
- Greater than or equal to 40%

- Transit Hub
- MetroLink Station
- Bus Route
- Arterial Street
- Local Street
- Compass Blueprint Strategy Area

Figure 11. Housing and Transportation Costs as a Percent of Income



Housing and Transportation Costs as Percent of Income

- 0 to 35%
- 35 to 50%
- 50 to 65%
- Greater than or equal to 65%

Sources: Center for Neighborhood Technology, Southern California Association of Governments, U.S. Census 2000

The City of El Monte enjoys lower combined housing and transportation costs than other parts of the San Gabriel Valley. This is because housing costs are lower than other parts of the Valley, rather than because transportation costs are lower. The Transit Village itself has higher housing and transportation costs relative to other parts of the City because it lacks the residential densities, mix of uses, and walkability of other parts of the City. However, with the amenities of the transit village, local residents will enjoy lower transportation costs, lower auto ownership rates, higher rates of transit use, and thus fewer vehicle miles traveled each year (or "VMT").

MEASURING SMART GROWTH: HOW DOES THE EL MONTE TRANSIT VILLAGE COMPARE?

Comparison of Current and Future Housing, Transportation, and Combined Costs

	Current	Future
Cars per HH	1.4	1.2
% Transit to Work	9%	14%
Annual VMT per HH	22,782	15,166

	El Monte Transit Village Area	City of El Monte	Los Angeles County
% Income Spent on Housing	20%	22%	28%
% Income Spent on Transportation	24%	25%	23%
<i>Combined</i>	<i>44%</i>	<i>46%</i>	<i>52%</i>

El Monte Housing and Transportation Rank Relative to Other Communities:
 Housing Cost: 72nd of 338
 Transportation Cost: 91st of 338 (near Encino, Santa Ana, San Gabriel)
 H+T: 71st of 338 (near San Bernardino, Paramount, Van Nuys)

Sources: Center for Neighborhood Technology, SCAG

Smart Growth Scores

The table to the right shows some of the smart growth factors that affect the affordability of transportation, as reported above.

The Transit Village is shown to currently have six times better connectivity than the regional average. The area also scores well in the jobs per acre category, given its advantageous location in the San Gabriel Valley. As a result, journey to work times are lower on average. Again, land use mix and housing density are the two factors on which the transit village currently scores low.

As the Transit Village is developed, the site's land use mix and housing density will increase significantly, lowering transportation costs.

Smart Growth Factors Affecting Transportation Affordability

	Average in the SCAG Region	El Monte Transit Village Area (Current)	How to Read:
Block Size	27.5 Acres	11.0 Acres	A smaller block size provides a more walkable environment
Transit Connectivity Index	1,804	12,251	The greater the transit connectivity, the more likely it is residents will take transit, developers will build near transit, etc.
Land Use Mix Index (0 = Least Diverse, 1=Most Diverse)	0.46	0.00	A greater mix of land uses enables local residents to access shopping and services without driving
Jobs per Square Mile in Nearby Areas	57,269	71,901	The closer a community is to jobs, the shorter the commutes. Shorter rides can also encourage commuters to use alternative transportation.
Households per Acre	6.5	7.0	More compact development can support a wider variety of retail and services, and make walking to these services easier
Average Journey to Work Time	28.5 Minutes	23.4 Minutes	Shorter commutes lead to cost savings in gas and other transportation expenditures (and reduce emissions)
Cars per Household	1.7	1.7	Car ownership rates can be influenced by local income levels, and by where you live

SCAG Composite Score

El Monte Transit Village Current Scores

Transit Service:	6.7	of 10
Walkability:	4.0	of 10
Land Use Mix:	5.4	of 10
Composite Score:	5.3	of 10

Source: Fregonese Calthorpe & Associates

LESSONS LEARNED

City involvement can make the difference in implementing complex joint development.

The City of El Monte and Community Redevelopment Agency are in charge of relocating uses, piecing together financing, and facilitating negotiations with the developer at the Transit Village. With 95 percent of the land in different public uses, coordination of this project is no small effort. The process involved in implementing the Specific Plan will require close management of many complex steps over a long period of time, and the City has demonstrated its pro-activeness in managing this process. According to the Titan Group, “The City could not be more helpful” in this process.

Consider pursuing feasibility studies, even in complex situations.

A site that is largely made up of public parks, public utilities, and commuter parking spaces owned by three separate public jurisdictions may not have seemed to be a likely candidate for private development. But a Memorandum of Understanding between the three public agencies was a small commitment to undertake in order to determine if the development was a possibility.

Up-front community outreach is critical.

The Transit Village developers have found that engaging the community at the start of the process has been a key to ensuring that the project has lasting public support. In the case of El Monte, the community input process resulted in a surprising change to the plan: preserving two ballparks throughout the construction process. Without this input the City Council may never have approved the plan.

Key circumstances make bus transit-oriented development possible at El Monte Transit Center.

Bus transit is not commonly thought of as the mode of choice in transit-oriented development. It is easier to draw a developer to a project on rail transit than bus because the high expense of construction, and the fixed nature of the train provide greater assurances that high quality transit service will be around for decades to come.

The El Monte example is more likely to succeed because of the high levels of bus transit already associated with the Transit Center, as well as its visibility and access from Santa Anita Avenue and Interstate 10. El Monte Transit Center functions as a transit hub, serving more than 20,000 riders per day. Additionally, **the dispersed nature of jobs and other destinations in the Los Angeles Region make bus an essential part of the transit network.** Buses at the El Monte Transit Center provide a service that no train station alone could: a network of transit that connects to multiple destinations throughout the San Gabriel Valley. As one City staff person noted, “this is bus country.” Lessons to take away for future TOD include:

Consider bus TOD in places that already act as hubs for a larger bus network.

Intermodal connections are extremely important for both bus and rail hubs.

Commit funding to infrastructure improvements that guarantee the long-term stability of a bus route, such as dedicated lanes and rights-of-way.

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