

# City plans commuter rail TOD

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By Patrick Brendel and Josef Molnar Friday, 21 May 2010

**JERSEY VILLAGE** — *Revised from the printed edition.* In anticipation that the city of Jersey Village could become a stop on a future commuter rail line to Houston, officials are considering investing \$40 million to create a transit-oriented development on the south side of Hwy. 290 that could become the new city center and a regional hub.

A rail district is currently studying the feasibility of a \$348-million heavy commuter rail line connecting Hempstead to Houston on existing freight tracks along Hwy. 290, and Jersey Village is in the running for a rail station.

City Council should receive a full financial report from project consultants in June. The council should be prepared to make a decision in 2011 on whether or not to proceed with the plan, about the time the rail plan will be released, City Manager Mike Castro said.

Even if Jersey Village is not selected as a rail stop, however, officials are motivated to annex and zone the unincorporated area around Wright Road before the Jones Road extension is complete—and in preparation for the \$4.6-billion Hwy. 290 program—to prevent the 297-acre tract from becoming just another swath of suburban sprawl.



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"The potential of this project is enormous for [Jersey Village]," said Mayor Russell Hamley. "It could change the entire image of Jersey Village to that of a dynamic commercial, retail and transportation center."

## Transit-oriented development

Transit-oriented development (TOD), as the name suggests, refers to commercial and residential districts built around mass transit stations or corridors and designed to encourage ridership on buses, trains, etc.

Typical TODs have high-density mixed-use buildings around a transit station, with lower-density spreading outward for one-quarter to one-half mile, which is the assumed maximum commute for most pedestrians. TODs also are designed to encourage cycling and walking, control the flow of automobile traffic and reduce the amount of land devoted to parking, compared to conventional development.

## Jersey Village TOD

Jersey Village's TOD conceptual plan—created by Kimley-Horn and Associates consultants and approved in March by Jersey Village city council—would incorporate those principles into developing the triangular area bounded roughly by Hwy. 290, Spencer Road and Wright Road. That area currently contains some single-family residences, mobile home communities and industrial development.

According to the plan, the potential rail station would be built on the south side of Hwy. 290 between Wright Road and the future Jones Road, which would bifurcate the TOD. Filling out the TOD would be a grid of neighborhood streets, including a "Main Street" anchored on the north end by a central plaza and the rail station, and on the south by a new City Hall.

Radiating out from the rail station are differently zoned districts, called: "TOD Core" (three- to five-story commercial/office and civic buildings); "TOD Transition" (two- to three-story commercial/office); "TOD Neighborhood" (two- to three-story commercial/residential); and, "Neighborhood Transition" (one- to two-story office/residential).

Running along Hwy. 290 is the densest "Highway Mixed Use" district, zoned for four- to six-story buildings purposed for commercial, office, civic or other uses. The conceptual plan also identifies potential sites for parks, a large hotel and a future light rail station.



## Money and the TOD

In mid-April, Kimley-Horn consultants unveiled the TOD's \$40-million price tag to the council, which does not include the cost of a new civic building. Consultants are exploring several funding options, including public improvement districts, management districts, tax increment reinvestment zones and city bonds. To spread out the burden, the council prefers creating the TOD in three phases of \$12–\$13 million each.

If the city executes the TOD plan, it will take about 20 years before the development is fully built out. Planners estimate the TOD would generate about \$4.3 million in annual property and sales tax revenue, while it would cost the city about \$1.9 million per year to provide services to the area.

"That's where the residents see their return: sales tax, property tax," Castro said. "That's a substantial part of it: the intangible. If this is a desirable location, that alone will work towards increasing the value."

To implement the plan, the city would annex the 297-acre area and apply zoning, but would not buy any land or build any structures except for parks, roads and public places. Jersey Village is the only entity in Northwest Houston with zoning authority.

"If we annex, we as a city have greater control," Castro said. "If we don't, it's the wild west. If we don't annex, we don't get property and sales taxes."

## Hempstead rail line

While Jersey Village officials are considering TOD plans, the Gulf Coast Rail District—a collaboration among Harris County, the City of Houston and Fort Bend County to explore improving the regional rail network—are conducting a feasibility study of constructing a \$348-million, 40-mile heavy commuter rail from Hempstead to Houston's Loop 610, where it would connect with Houston Metro's Northwest Transit Center. The \$715,000 study by Houston-based engineering firm Klotz Associates should come out by early 2011.

In contrast to light rail—already running in Houston and part of the long-term Hwy. 290 program—heavy commuter rail can run on existing freight tracks, owned and used by Union Pacific. It would take about five years to establish agreements, upgrade the tracks, receive the trains and cars and get heavy commuter rail running, estimated Maureen Crocker, interim executive director of the rail district.

"[W]e would be using rail that is already there," she said. "With light rail we would need to go buy the right of

way and lay the track, but here we wouldn't need to do that."

## Jones Road and Hwy. 290

Even if Jersey Village is not selected as a heavy rail stop, the council could go forward with the plan anyway to prepare for opportunities created by the Jones Road extension and Hwy. 290 program.

"We've envisioned the plan as the rail is the icing, not the cake," said Joe Willhite of Kimley-Horn. "Development out further on Hwy. 290 has stopped. People are not willing to drive an hour-and-a-half anymore one way to work."

The new Jones Road corridor is likely to spark developers' interest. Construction of the \$4.8-million section is expected to begin in the fall and wrap up in fall 2011.

*Source: City of Jersey Village*

## More on TODs

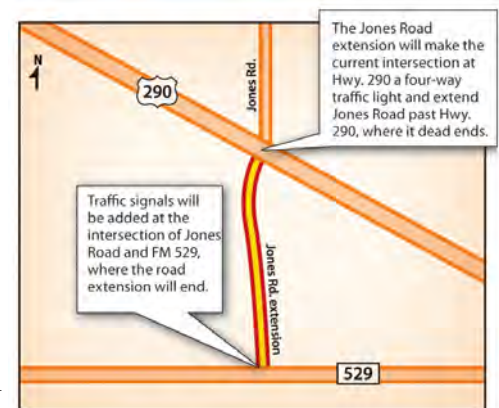
A transit-oriented development is a mixed-use development designed to maximize transit use.

As part of the planning process, Jersey Village officials visited several TODs in the Dallas area.

TODs can be large or small, but all TODs use form-based code, a type of zoning strategy concerned with how buildings look and feel, rather than what their particular use is.

**Revised:** The story in our print edition indicates that a bus station would be included in the TOD if the commuter rail does not stop in Jersey Village. This is not part of the City of Jersey Village's proposal.

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