

Policy objective: Expanding access to public transit

The expansion of light rail and subway lines, bus rapid transit, and other fixed-route public transit can help to advance important environmental and livability objectives by reducing greenhouse gas emissions associated with car usage and facilitating walkable neighborhoods oriented around the transit stations.

In many regions, however, the expansion of fixed-route public transit leads to increases in land and housing prices around transit stations, making it difficult for low- and moderate-income households to afford to live there, and, in some cases, displacing existing residents. This problem is [especially acute](#) in high-cost regions where the transit system provides good connectivity to businesses and other important destinations.

Without addressing this problem, the result of a public transit expansion can be both inequitable – why should low- and moderate-income households have less access than higher-income households to public transit with reliable and frequent service? – and likely to undermine the environmental benefits of expanding public transit by making access difficult for the population most likely to use it. Lower-income households on a tight budget often rely on public transit to get to work and school as well as to access other important services. Older adults and people with disabilities who are unable or prefer not to drive also count on buses and trains to meet their transportation needs.

The solution is to coordinate transportation and housing policy in a manner that simultaneously: (a) increases the number of residents living in close proximity to public transit; (b) fosters walkable communities centered around new and existing transit stations; and (c) preserves and expands affordable housing near these stations. By acting early, local jurisdictions can make the most of opportunities to preserve and create affordable housing as part of the development that takes place around new or planned transit stations.

Expand access to public transit using the housing policy toolkit

To ensure that low- and moderate-income households can afford to live near public transit, local jurisdictions can take proactive steps to preserve existing affordable housing in areas that are currently well-served by public transit or where new service is planned, ideally before housing and land prices increase dramatically. Communities can also adopt policies to incent or require the inclusion of affordable housing within new development near planned transit stations and prioritize development of new

affordable units on sites near or adjacent to current or planned transit stations, or along high-frequency bus routes, including through joint development agreements with the local transit authority. Tenant-based rental assistance can help to expand access to these areas, especially when combined with mobility counseling and other assistance to help households identify well-located units.

Communities working to expand the availability of affordable housing in resource-rich areas that are not well served by public transit should also consider strategies for strengthening public transit service in these areas.

This exhibit describes how policy tools in the [Housing Policy Library](#) can be used to expand access to public transit. The policies listed here are illustrative options within each category.

I. Create and preserve dedicated affordable housing units

<p>Logic/mechanism: Policy tools that create and preserve affordable housing can be targeted on areas with frequent public transit service and/or the areas around new or planned transit stations.</p>	<p>Specific policies: Adopt strong incentives for the inclusion of affordable units in new development or rehab, throughout the jurisdiction or within walking distance of transit stations and high-frequency bus routes, including density bonuses, reduced parking requirements, expedited permitting, tax abatements or exemptions, and reduced or waived fees. Alternatively, or in addition, adopt mandatory inclusionary zoning in these areas.</p> <p>Work with transit agencies to establish joint development agreements that include affordable housing near transit stations.</p> <p>Identify surplus publicly-owned land near current or planned transit stations that could be repurposed for development of affordable housing.</p> <p>Establish criteria that prioritize transit-accessible locations that are also rich in other key resources when allocating limited housing subsidies, including Low-Income Housing Tax Credits, project-based Housing Choice Vouchers, and financing to preserve moderate-cost rental units.</p>
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II. Promote affordability by reducing barriers to new supply

<p>Logic/mechanism: Zoning changes can allow for higher density housing development near transit stations.</p>	<p>Specific policies: Rezone for higher residential density to accommodate greater demand near transit stations.</p> <p>Reduce parking requirements to help reduce development costs and potentially free up space for additional residential units in areas well served by public transit.</p>
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III. Help households access and afford private-market homes

<p>Logic/mechanism: Tenant-based rental assistance can improve low-income households' access to transit-accessible areas.</p>	<p>Specific policies: Provide mobility counseling and recruit landlords to help Housing Choice Voucher holders find housing options in areas that are near public transit and also rich in other key resources.</p> <p>Increase voucher payment standards in high-cost and resource-rich areas that are well-served by public transit to make these areas available to Housing Choice Voucher holders.</p>
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IV. Protect against displacement and poor housing conditions

<p>Logic/mechanism: Measures to enhance housing stability can help to prevent renters from being displaced as land values around transit stations increase.</p>	<p>Specific policies: Adopt "just cause" eviction policies to prevent displacement among existing renters in areas near new transit stations.</p> <p>Provide protection from condo conversions to prevent the loss of affordable unsubsidized rentals.</p>
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Combining policies to expand access to public transit

The policies highlighted in the exhibit can be used in combination, as illustrated in the following scenario.

A planned expansion of a city's light rail service includes the creation of 10 new stations along a line that will terminate at centers of employment in the central business district and in an outlying suburb. Through a partnership with the housing department, the regional transit agency has adopted a joint development policy that prioritizes residential projects on agency-owned land that set aside at least 20 percent of the units for housing permanently affordable to low-income households. The city has also partnered with public housing agencies in adjacent suburbs to pool a portion of their project-based vouchers to use for rental properties within one-quarter mile of the new light rail stations. Land prices in these areas have already escalated too quickly for the city to purchase vacant land or existing unsubsidized affordable rental properties near the proposed stations at a reasonable price, but local officials identify several underutilized public warehouses in transit-accessible locations to be redeveloped as affordable housing. The local inclusionary zoning program also assures that any new residential development stimulated by the planned transit stations will include units affordable to low-income households.