High Density Housing and Transportation

17355 SW Boones Ferry Rd.
Lake Oswego, OR 97035
Phone (503) 635-3618
Fax (503) 635-5395

To: Jim Olson, City of Ashland

From: Tom Litster, Otak

Copies: Project Management Team

Date: March 2, 2011

Subject: High Density Housing and Transportation —White Paper

Project No.: 15702: City of Ashland Transportation System Plan Update

Direction to the Planning Commission and Transportation Commission

Five sets of white papers are being produced to present information on tools, opportunities, and potential strategies that could help Ashland become a nationwide leader as a green transportation community. Each white paper will present general information regarding a topic and then provide ideas on where and how that tool, strategy, and/or policy could be used within Ashland.

You will have the opportunity to review the content of each white paper and share your thoughts, concerns, questions, and ideas in a joint Planning Commission/Transportation Commission meeting. Based on discussions at the meeting, the material in the white paper will be: 1) revised and incorporated into the alternatives analysis for the draft TSP; or 2) eliminated from consideration and excluded from the alternatives analysis. The overall intent of the white paper series is to explore opportunities for Ashland and increase the opportunities to discuss the many possibilities for Ashland.

Maximizing the Benefits of Multimodal Transportation and Housing Density

Identifying where and how to link City policies and incentives for higher density housing to investments in multimodal transportation will maximize the potential benefits from both. Those benefits can be expected to include:

- Reducing travel trips by car.
- Enhancing connections between institutions, activity centers, downtown, and residences.
- Creating momentum for enhanced transit, pedestrian, and bicycle facilities.
- Providing affordable housing opportunities.

- Engaging key stakeholders in planning for transit corridors.
- Engaging the development community in considering the desired types of redevelopment.

The best opportunities in Ashland to leverage these benefits are within the transit corridors currently served by Rogue Valley Transit Department (RVTD), and in the potential to restore the discontinued bus service along East Main Street. These corridors correspond reasonably well with three other conditions favorable to increasing density.

Pedestrian and Bicycle Activity. Analysis from Technical Memorandum #3 – System Inventory identified multiple locations with medium- to high-levels of pedestrian and bicycle activities. These areas correspond well to the selected Pedestrian Place locations being studied as part of the TSP update. Additional housing density will increase pedestrian and bicycle activity, encourage less driving (perhaps even reduce car ownership), and gradually reduced the sense that these neighborhoods are overburdened by streets with the highest volumes of vehicles relative to their residential, retail, and employment opportunities.

Favorable Zoning. Most of the lengths of existing transit corridors are in commercial zoning (C-1 and C-1-D) and residential zoning (R-2 and R-3) that is favorable to residential density thresholds for frequent bus service (see Table 1).

Redevelopable Lands. The transit corridors along Tolman Creek Road, Ashland Street, and East Main (if service were restored) serve significant amounts to vacant, partially vacant, and redevelopable lands. This offers an opportunity to direct and facilitate neighborhood change that maximizes the benefits of integrating multimodal transportation and higher density housing.

Transit-Supportive Densities

Assessments of what levels of residential and employment densities will support good transit service have evolved over the past decade, oftentimes with varying target densities for different types of transit and in different cities. Increasing residential density is a trip-origin strategy to support transit. That means residential units are the most important land use factor in increasing ridership. Generally agreed on densities for transit service are as follows:

Table 1

Level of Service	Residential Density Threshold
Local bus service (1 bus per hour)	4–5 dwelling units/acre
Intermediate bus service (1 bus every 30 minutes)	7–8 dwelling units/acre
Frequent bus service (1 bus every 10 minutes)	12–15 dwelling units/acre
High Capacity Transit (HCT) systems (primarily streetcar and light rail transit)	25–50 dwelling units/acre

Existing zoning for most of the length of the corridors meets or exceeds threshold densities for frequent bus service (7-15 dwelling units/acre or greater). One notable exception to this assessment of current zoning is an approximately 90-acre area south of the East Main Corridor, referred to as the Normal Avenue area. It will be annexed from the County as low density Single Family Residential (SFR). It is the last sizable tract of undeveloped residential land in the Ashland UGB.

Those densities can be built as long as parking needs can be met. Lowering parking requirements to approximately half of what is currently required is a recommendation being considered as part of the Pedestrian Places task of the TSP update. The Ashland Land Use Ordinance already provides options to reduce minimum parking space requirement that could be applied within the transit corridors. Lowering the number of parking stalls has a direct relationship to utilization of a parcel for building footprint (floor area ratio or FAR). An increased FAR means an increased number of residential units can be constructed, especially those units considered affordable within the overall housing market. The amount of space required to build and provide circulation for one parking space is about the same size as an efficiency apartment. In addition, parking is an added site cost that can't be converted directly into revenue from leasable floor space except through higher rents.

During the development of the Pedestrian Places concepts, questions have been raised about the possibility of requiring no off-street residential parking in specific areas as a strategy to increase the achievable densities and to encourage non-vehicle travel by the residences. Allowing for residential development with no off-street parking (but not requiring that strategy) could be considered. However, two factors may work against implementing that kind of land use change. First, the developer may believe that a financially feasible market value for the project cannot be achieved without providing off-street parking. Second, a high density development without parking may not be acceptable to the surrounding neighborhood because of concerns about over-utilization of the neighborhood supply of on-street parking by residents of the new development.

A comprehensive assessment of the zoning code is currently being conducted as part of the Pedestrian Place process. That assessment, and its recommendations regarding strategies to alter parking standards, is currently under review by the Community Development Department. Those same recommendations, if accepted, could apply to other areas targeted for high density residential uses. These changes will support future development that is more transit-supportive by virtue of densities, the mix of uses and pedestrian-oriented design qualities. As a consequence, it is reasonable to expect a reduction in vehicle trips.

Corridor Planning

As previously noted, the existing transit corridors seem to be the best place to focus strategies to achieve higher density housing. Perhaps the best definition of high density housing for Ashland is those densities typical of frequent bus service and the lower range for HCT (Table 1). Planning for

transit-supportive residential development can occur at the scale of the region, the corridor, the station area, and the parcel. An example of parcel-level planning is the Pedestrian Places concept plans. Four specific parcels have been examined closely for achievable residential densities, along with other site development and streetscape qualities that represent pedestrian-oriented design. The densities achievable are in line with the density guidelines noted above. A station area approach would expand that study to a 5-minute or 10-minute walking area around those parcels. This approach is more typical of station area planning for HCT systems rather than for local bus service. However, the Pedestrian Places effort has considered that larger area with regard to enhanced connectivity and an overall assessment of current zoning.

We suggest the City undertake a corridor planning effort for each of the transit corridors, and the potential East Main transit corridor. A corridor study can comprehensively look at market factors, financial pro forma factors for development, and identify potential best locations for high density housing. The benefits of a transit corridor plan could include:

- Facilitating market-driven projects.
- Influencing the direction and rate of change within the neighborhoods.
- Generating enthusiasm for transit-supportive growth.
- An implementation strategy for coordinating public and private actions.

Corridor planning is also an excellent opportunity to integrate regional and local objectives. This could be a successful collaboration between the City and RVTD that leads to increases in the frequency of bus service, the number of institutional destinations served, and the number of routes within the City. Also, it is an opportunity to include an analysis of the real estate market and where it will be the most active. Holistically considering these local, regional, and market contexts through a corridor planning effort will make it easier to select the right locations and to prioritize investments and incentives among the potential corridors.

Targeting specific areas for higher density housing and prioritizing public actions to encourage that type development is important. The market potential for high density housing in Ashland is uncertain. The Rental Needs Analysis (2007) provides some useful information and forecasts but does not address some of the questions of development's financial feasibility or the current market trends. Given that uncertainty about overall development potential in Ashland, we suggest trying to focus development in specific areas in order to help achieve other significant objectives:

- Restore and expand transit service.
- Create Pedestrian Places characterized, in part, by mixed use residential development.
- Provide affordable housing choices in proximity to urban amenities such as schools, shopping, parks, and good multimodal transportation infrastructure.

Corridor Types

There are three generally accepted types of transit corridors. Some of the best analysis of these corridor types has been done by the Center for Transit-Oriented Development. Each type is defined by what it connects and how connections might influence development, including high density housing. Few actual transit corridors, including the existing corridors in Ashland, fit neatly into only one of these categories. A corridor planning approach for Ashland would likely be based on a mix of types and a variety of development expectations. The three corridor types are summarized below.

Destination Connector. Connectors link housing to activity and employment centers and to institutional uses like medical centers and academic campuses. They capture ridership both ways during the day, especially to and from the 9-to-5 employment centers. This often results in high ridership that builds support for the kind of integrated regional and local service that can be provided in Ashland through RVTD.

Development will likely be highest around the stops serving destinations like activity or employment centers. These areas need to be compact and walkable, and have good connections to the surrounding neighborhood. Residential development, the trip origin points, will be scattered throughout the corridor, but at higher densities overall due to the market demand for housing with transit access to jobs and activity centers.

Commuter Connector. Transit in a commuter corridor usually serves only on a major activity center in a community the size of Ashland. That transit station is most often in the downtown core or central business district. Frequent ridership does not occur throughout the day, as it does with destination connectors. It has peak service in the morning and evening hours. This would be typical of future commuter rail service, but not indicative of the types of bus service that would be provided by RVTD.

The creation and location of high density housing will be more sporadic and difficult to predict than it is for destination connectors. Commuter rail does not typically have the same station area, residential development benefits as a destination connector. Market demand for corridor housing may be influenced to an equal or greater extent by factors such as proximity to urban amenities like schools and parks. It is important to enhance the station areas with very good bicycle and pedestrian access. A park-and-ride lot will likely be needed. In assessing a potential commuter rail station at the Railroad Property or the Croman Mill Property, these connectivity and parking issues will be important to the transit function.

District Circulator. Circulators facilitate movement within a district or a large activity node, like downtown. A streetcar is an exemplary district circulator. They move at relatively slow speeds and enhance walkability, making it easier to access the district's amenities without a car. These circulators may also connect neighboring nodes. In the case of Ashland, a downtown circulator could also provide connections to Southern Oregon University (SOU) campus and one or more of the

Pedestrian Places mentioned earlier. Circulators can also be part of a district-wide parking management plan. They benefit greatly from complementary streetscape improvements along their routes.

District circulators can have a strong development impact and are able to attract significant market-rate housing if land is available, the market is active, and they connect to other important nodes within the city. To realize that potential as a streetcar system, there must be strong political leadership and vision partnered with strong private leadership from businesses and developers. There must also be strong anchors, like downtown and the SOU campus.

At the present, only bus service is available in Ashland, and there is a strongly expressed desire to improve both the days and frequency of service on Routes 10 and 15 and to restore the discontinued Route 5 service. In that respect, corridor planning for a destination connector may be the best way to integrate transportation improvements and any targeted locations for high density housing. If commuter rail service, such as the Rogue Valley Commuter Rail Project (2006), continues in earnest, or a feasibility assessment of streetcar takes shape, the aspects of higher density housing in those corridor types should also become a planning focus for the City.

Zoning

Once the recommended zoning changes to implement the concept of Pedestrian Places have been accepted, similar zoning changes should be considered for any other areas targeted for higher density, mixed use development. In some areas along the transit corridors, like the Croman Mill District, supportive zoning and design standards changes have already been implemented. For most of their lengths, the existing transit corridors and the potential East Main Street corridor are within zones whose achievable residential densities match the target densities for frequent bus service.

Currently in Ashland, it does not seem that allowable densities or building heights are the factors inhibiting the development of more high density housing. As noted in our zoning review for the Pedestrian Places process, reduced parking standards, along with reduced building setbacks, can contribute to a higher FAR and higher residential densities. However, if the financial realities of the real estate market, the confidence of the local development community in development costs and achievable rents, and a general acceptance of higher density housing by the larger community are not part of the redevelopment picture, then zoning will do little to create the desired development.

Suggested Next Steps for Ashland

As next steps for the City to holistically examine the beneficial relationships between multimodal transportation and higher density housing, we encourage the following:

- Define and fund a corridor planning study. Set specific objectives for the study that will facilitate a full and integrated understanding of the market potential for redevelopment in the transit corridors. The study should also indentify key opportunity locations where the integration of public investments in transportation improvements and private investments in new development will best respond to community values and to the overarching goals of sustainability, equity and transportation accessibility. Locations identified in the TSP update as Pedestrian Places would certainly be among those locations.
- The study should include a real estate market analysis and a focus group assembled from the development community. In addition to a professional market analysis, the focus group will help inform the understanding of the financial feasibility of higher density housing in Ashland. In addition, the developers can identify anything in the City's development code or development review process that they believe adversely impacts their ability to deliver the desired qualities and types of development.
- The study should include an implementation strategy to coordinate near-term and long-term actions. Coordinated actions might include the timing of transportation improvements, pilot projects for Pedestrian Places, exploration of joint development projects through urban renewal, zoning amendments, and any supplemental development standards. With regard to supplemental development standards, the stakeholder and community outreach process may be helpful in identifying any need for those standards to gain wider acceptance of higher density housing.
- Once the recommended zoning changes to implement the concept of Pedestrian Places have been accepted, similar zoning changes should be considered for any other areas targeted for higher density, mixed use development. In some areas, like the Croman Mill District, supportive zoning and design standards changes have already been implemented.
- As the City completes its urban renewal district feasibility study, it should consider the ways in which higher density housing can be encouraged within those districts through incentives such as subsidizing infrastructure costs and tax abatement programs or engaging in private/public joint development projects.