



City and County of Honolulu

Downtown Neighborhood Transit-Oriented Development Plan

Stakeholder Interviews Report

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1 Introduction

PLAN OVERVIEW

The City and County of Honolulu is preparing neighborhood plans that integrate neighborhood planning with planning for the High Capacity Rail Project. The purpose of the plans is to create policies that capitalize on the opportunities brought by rail access, while also addressing potential challenges. The Downtown Neighborhood Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Plan will address land use, transportation, economic, and infrastructure plans around three planned stations: Downtown, Chinatown, and Iwilei.

The planning area will encompass about a 2,000-foot radius around each station. Within this area, opportunities for land use, transportation improvements, and community facilities will be examined. A broader ½-mile radius area will be used to integrate transportation connections. The Downtown Neighborhood TOD Plan process started in December 2010. Throughout the planning process, community members will be offered a variety of opportunities to help develop a vision and plan for these station areas that reflects the community’s most important values and priorities. Outreach activities include stakeholder interviews (the subject of this report), community workshops, a community needs assessment survey, an advisory committee, and ongoing updates to the City’s website.

THIS REPORT

This report describes the process and results of the first community outreach effort: stakeholders’ interviews. For this effort, representatives of public agencies, community organizations, businesses, and property owners from the neighborhood, were interviewed in one-on-one or small group settings in order to identify their major issues, ideas, and concerns related to development around transit stations in their communities. This effort is one component of the larger community outreach program.

Stakeholder Interviewees

Although all neighborhood residents, employees, and visitors, are “stakeholders” in the area, these initial meetings targeted individuals representing a variety of interests and organizations to explore a range of issues and needs. The small group nature of these discussions enabled individuals to be more candid and in-depth than they otherwise might be in a larger community forum. Moreover, discussions could be focused on topics more salient to the individual and the mission of the organization or position that he or she represented. Interviews were conducted between December 1 and December 14, 2010. City staff and consultants from Dyett & Bhatia met with most interviewees in person; phone interviews were conducted with a few individuals. A total of 21 individuals participated.

Report Organization

Following this introduction, Section 2 summarizes major themes, mentioned by the majority of stakeholders. Section 3 provides more detail and discussion of these themes, as well as secondary ideas and concerns. Section 4 discusses next steps in the planning process.

2 Major Themes

The following major themes were consistently raised by stakeholders:

1. Explore strategic opportunities for higher intensity development downtown. While the recent economic downturn has resulted in empty office space, the core area remains the principal office and public employment center in the region, and attracts a great deal of traffic. Stakeholders hope that rail will alleviate congestion, provide relief for commuters, and boost downtown, which is challenged by congestion and inadequate parking.
2. Customize strategies for achieving TOD. Generally, stakeholders support the rail and TOD; however, all three stations are unique, and will require customized strategies. Principal opportunities for the Downtown Station include: Aloha Tower area, as well as key parcels along Fort Street Mall; for Chinatown: surface parking lots along Nimitz Highway and rehabilitation of buildings in disrepair; Iwilei Station: a range of underutilized warehouses.
3. Expand the range of uses downtown to provide greater round-the-clock vibrancy: encourage residential uses, enabling people to live closer to jobs; locally-serving commercial uses; and potentially some hotels. Housing remains a very pressing need in the core.
4. Work with the State and other agencies to realize the full potential of Aloha Tower. This represents a key opportunity. Identified needs include: celebratory/public gathering space; connection to downtown/Nimitz crossing; uses that serve the local population; potential new high-intensity residential and hotel development. Need for coordinated, integrated development between State/City, Aloha Tower/rest of downtown.
5. Design train stations to be integrated with the surroundings. Many of these areas will carry heavy volumes of pedestrian traffic. Recommended improvements include: uses at the ground level (such as cafés to promote self-policing and safety); escalators and moving sidewalks (elevated) to enable people to get to station more easily; and improved sidewalks. Some stakeholders are concerned that the Downtown station is not the best location, especially if the power station remains.
6. Develop a coordinated parking strategy and standards that emphasizes transit and pedestrian movement, rather than cars. Consider removing parking requirements, and developing parking solutions that enable parking to be shared between multiple uses, rather than individual buildings.
7. Work toward a comprehensive solution to minimize impacts of homeless on street safety, appearance, and open spaces. Homelessness has been identified as one of the key barriers to achieving TOD and greater integration between public space and new private development. The consequence has been that developers are designing introverted buildings, and people are driving or changing bus lines even for short distances to avoid the homeless.
8. Develop a coordinated strategy for transformation of the Iwilei station into TOD, from the crest of the harbor and underutilized warehouse sites to improved connections from the residential neighborhoods mauka of Nimitz Highway. While several of the uses are vibrant, the area as a whole is tremendously underutilized considering its proximity to downtown. Stakeholders underscore that new uses would require cohesive circulation improvements, including new streets.

3 Discussion Topics

TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT AND STATION DESIGN

Overall, stakeholders support development of the rail and new and revitalized uses around rail stations. Stakeholders envision that downtown workers and Chinatown visitors will use the rail extensively if station areas are well designed, pedestrian paths are safe and convenient, and bus and shuttle connections are available. Stakeholders hope that the rail will become an amenity for downtown and that it will help alleviate traffic congestion and parking constraints.

However, many stakeholders express concern that a typical station will be solely a platform, as opposed to a station with relevant amenities—retail shops, restrooms, ticket windows, etc.—that will create a welcoming environment integrated with the surroundings. They see a need to create a cohesive station area environment, with convenient connections, appropriate development and services for Downtown workers, cruise ship passengers, and visitors. Some stakeholders believe Nimitz Highway is a poor location for the stations, providing fewer development opportunities and limited access to downtown and Chinatown. Stakeholders also worry about safety, cleanliness, and security of the stations, fearing that if stations are not well maintained and patrolled, then people will not use the train. Active uses (such as cafés), integrated with the stations, would create a hub of activity and enable “self patrolling.”

AREA CHARACTER

Downtown, Chinatown, and Iwilei stations each have a distinct character. Downtown is the financial and professional office hub of Honolulu, exemplified by tall office buildings, a bustling day time population, and small ancillary uses (e.g. lunch spots). This area is also exemplified by the State harbor operations, with most imports and smaller cruise ships traveling through this harbor. Honolulu’s Chinatown is one of the oldest Chinatowns in the United States and has served a gateway for new immigrants—Chinese, but also Vietnamese, Filipino, and other ethnic groups—for over 100 years. Local chefs and home cooks visit its markets each day, along with visitors shopping and touring Chinatown’s historic architecture.

However, at night, both Chinatown and downtown “shut down,” with few evening activities to keep workers and visitors in the area. The exception to this is First Fridays, a popular once-a-month arts event, where Chinatown and downtown galleries, museums and studios are open to the public. Stakeholders are concerned about safety, crime, and homeless individuals migrating to Chinatown at night, utilizing the neighborhood’s architectural nooks and crannies to take shelter. Stakeholders lament the impacts on safety (actual and perceived) as well as the cleanliness of streets. Downtown and Chinatown soup kitchen and homeless services are also perceived as driving potential customers and tenants away from the area.

Across the canal from Chinatown, the Iwilei Station area lies near the often-congested intersection of two large streets—King Street and Dillingham Boulevard—and hosts an assortment of commercial and industrial businesses, as well as harbor activities. Stakeholders see the area as reasonably safe by day, with many workers and through-traffic in the area. However, the areas around the Salvation Army and the Institute for Human Services, which provide services to homeless, tend to create opportunities for loitering. This creates an atmosphere that is unwelcoming to community members and potential businesses.

LAND USE MIX

Core Office

Downtown is composed of professional and public office uses, representing the financial hub of Honolulu. However, stakeholders currently see a high vacancy rate in downtown office space that may take some time to recover.

Shopping Center and Small Business Retail

Downtown has a range of retail businesses, including Macy's and small retail and office businesses along the pedestrian-only Fort Street Mall. Makai of Nimitz Highway, the Aloha Tower Marketplace provides shopping, restaurants, and services for cruise ship passengers. However, stakeholders say that these tenants are struggling and vacancies are high. Stakeholders cite Aloha Towers' poor accessibility—situated across the busy Nimitz Highway and with limited parking—as a constraint to its success as a retail destination. Contemporary cruise ships are also larger than what the terminal was designed for, and no longer dock there.

Chinatown boasts many restaurants, markets, and shops, which are very busy by day. There are some bars patronized by young people at night, but they are limited. Some stakeholders believe that high rents, crime, and safety concerns have led to several vacancies in the neighborhood. The Iwilei station area has a variety of commercial uses, including small offices, auto-oriented uses, and fast food fronting Dillingham Boulevard and King Street. Makai of Dillingham Boulevard are larger businesses including building supplies and the Salvation Army Thrift Store, along with manufacturing and warehouse uses described below.

Industrial, Warehouse, and Harbor Uses

Stakeholders acknowledge that the vast majority of imports travel through the harbor, and that these operations are essential to the city's economy. Industrial and warehouse uses are well occupied in the area, though many of these spaces have been converted to new uses, such as wholesalers and retail. Many stakeholders would like to see them remain, since there are few other available locations for such uses.

Housing

Housing in the planning area is primarily located near Iwilei and Chinatown stations, with limited housing located downtown. Kukui Gardens and Mayor Wright Homes are two subsidized housing developments on the mauka side of Iwilei Station. More recently, a moderately-priced high rise development was constructed near the intersection of King Street and Iwilei Road, providing views of the water and proximity to Chinatown. Chinatown has a few apartments close to the station (including at the corner of River Street and Nimitz Highway, directly adjacent to the station) and much more dense high-rise apartments on the mauka side of Beretania Street.

Social Services

There are a variety of social service providers throughout the planning area. River of Life Mission provides meals, health clinics, recovery housing, and other services in Chinatown and downtown. Stakeholders tend to agree that these services and the clients they serve are not an appropriate use within downtown. Recently, a proposal for a transitional housing development

in Chinatown was rejected recently by the community; there is a sense among stakeholders that Chinatown has taken on too much of the burden of providing social services. The Iwilei station area includes the Institute for Human Services shelter which draws a homeless population seeking shelter and hot meals. From most stakeholders' perspective these services lead to loitering and an atmosphere that is unwelcoming to community members and potential business.

DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Overall, stakeholders would like to see more housing, shopping, amenities, and entertainment downtown and expand some of these uses into the Iwilei area. They see an opportunity to capitalize on the success of the First Fridays arts initiatives to add to the area's nightlife and improve safety. New residents and activities may also help to reinvigorate downtown retail centers. Most stakeholders emphasized the need for housing in the area.

Downtown Station

Stakeholders see opportunities for development along the harbor as well as in the core of downtown. At Aloha Tower, they would like to see the site better utilized with improvements to the historic park and new uses including retail for downtown workers, visitors, and cruise ship passengers, as well as residential and potentially hotel uses to provide a more 24-hour community. Surface parking areas could be redeveloped with active uses, and parking either provided in structures, or even reduced or eliminated given proximity to the rail. Since the management of this redevelopment site is currently in flux, this planning process will need to coordinate land use programming with whatever body is determined to be responsible for Aloha Tower's development possibilities. In the short-term, this site needs information and wayfinding signage for cruise ship passengers, as well as public bathrooms (though stakeholders admit that these are nearly impossible to maintain, given the homeless population). In addition, the current substation operated by the Hawaiian Electric Company is an appropriate location for development, should the utility decide or have incentive to move the facility. Similar to the Aloha Tower site, stakeholders believe that residential and commercial uses may be appropriate here.

In the heart of downtown, some stakeholders see an opportunity for redevelopment of the Macy's store and some adjacent areas into a mixed-use residential development, with higher-end stores at the lower levels and residential tower(s) above. New residential development would allow people to live closer to jobs and also create a bigger market for local-serving retail uses. A least one stakeholder suggested starting a merchants association to help market the area and improve the mix and quality of retail stores, restaurants, and entertainment venues.

In general, stakeholders think the market for office uses is currently limited as vacancies are high and leased spaces are underutilized. The demand for housing in the core will continue to be strong as supply is very limited, and retail uses and restaurants need to cater to the local population more.

Chinatown Station

Stakeholders generally see two objectives related to TOD in Chinatown: preserving Chinatown culture and enhancing the neighborhood with revitalized uses and amenities. Stakeholders see a variety of needs, including residential development, along with services for seniors (e.g.

health care) and youth (e.g. day care, language schools). Uses should support Chinatown's older population and its role as a gateway for new immigrants from a variety of Asian and Pacific Island countries. Development opportunities in Chinatown are limited due to special district regulations and the presence of historic properties, but stakeholders also see a need for building rehabilitation and small additions. Nevertheless, there are a couple surface parking lots along Nimitz Highway that may be appropriate for new development.

Iwilei Station

Many stakeholders see development opportunities near Iwilei station for residential and commercial development, given its proximity to downtown and Chinatown and the presence of underutilized sites. Makai of the station, sites include underutilized warehouse spaces along Iwilei Road and between east and west bound lanes of Nimitz Highway. Stakeholders see an opportunity to construct high-rise residential towers that take advantage of the harbor location and provide views of the water. Stakeholders point to the new development on Iwilei Road as a good example of housing that is affordable by design: moderately priced with small units and few amenities (e.g. no swimming pool). (However, they also note the development is designed to be "introverted," with extensive security measures—fencing, cameras, on-site security, etc.—in light of safety concerns in the neighborhood. In addition, new commercial development could build on the existing retail and big box stores to improve the mix of commercial uses, while also improving the walkability of the neighborhood.

Mauka of the station, stakeholders see an opportunity to renovate older affordable housing developments (specifically Mayor Wright Homes, built in 1952; upgrades to Kukui Gardens are underway). New connections to Iwilei Station will need to be created from these residences to support transit ridership and ensure safe and convenient pedestrian routes.

Many of the same stakeholders that support new development in this area also concerned about the loss of existing warehouse spaces, as well as safety issues in the neighborhood. Many stakeholders see the Iwilei area as a "no man's land" and are concerned about crime, safety, and the perception that loitering of homeless people around the Institute for Human Services and Salvation Army Thrift Store will have on potential developers and tenants. In addition, some stakeholders are concerned about the displacement of industrial and warehouse uses. Stakeholders have mixed perspectives on whether these uses could be easily relocated as use needs change or whether they should remain.

Barriers to Development

Stakeholders recognize several barriers to development and redevelopment. The vast majority of stakeholders are concerned about the presence of homeless people in achieving TOD in the area. The city, community and this plan need to work toward a comprehensive strategy to improve the safety and appearance of public spaces, while providing homeless services here or elsewhere. Stakeholders have mixed opinions about whether existing uses should remain. They are also concerned about gentrification raising rents. Construction costs are already high and some stakeholders are concerned about infrastructure capacity (especially sewer) and who will pay for any necessary upgrades. Some stakeholders are concerned about the loss of views from current waterfront view locations. Some are also worried about noise nuisances on residents from train and harbor operations. A few stakeholders are concerned about noise and vibration from the rail harming Chinatown's older structures.

PEDESTRIAN AND BICYCLE IMPROVEMENTS

Downtown and Chinatown will have a lot of potential riders, so stakeholders overwhelmingly agree that the station areas need substantial improvements in terms of pedestrian connections. Considering these two stations locations in the Nimitz Highway right-of-way, integrating the stations into the existing development context will be challenging. Some stakeholders recommend a pedestrian overpass or skyway, escalators and moving sidewalks (elevated), at the Downtown Station across Nimitz Highway—to and from the Aloha Tower/cruise ship docks and downtown. Several stakeholders used the example of Ala Moana as a destination where patrons are willing to walk much longer distances, since there are shops to peruse and opportunities to sit or take shelter from sun or rain.

The Chinatown Station is surrounded by water on two sides, so several stakeholders highlight the need for improvements along both Nimitz and River Street to improve pedestrian movement. Stakeholders believe that many residents of Kukui Gardens and other nearby housing developments walk to Chinatown (and will walk to Chinatown Station, as opposed to Iwilei Station), so pedestrian connections across the canal are also important.

Iwilei Station is already challenged by poor pedestrian connections, on both sides of Dillingham Boulevard. New streets should be incorporated into development plans as sites are redeveloped. Sidewalks, crosswalks, signals, and lighting will need to be added here.

Stakeholders lament the lack of bicycle use here and throughout the city due to safety concerns. Streets that lack bicycle lanes or shoulders, speeding cars, a culture that does not support bicycle use, and a high accident rate were all cited as reasons why community members do not choose to ride bikes, despite the fact that the area is flat and the weather is good. Still, bike parking facilities were recommended to accommodate the limited bicycle users that do exist and who may use transit.

BUS AND VEHICLE CIRCULATION AND PARKING

Stakeholders were consistent and clear that the stations should be designed to be safe and convenient for pedestrians and well-integrated with bus service. Several stakeholders see a need for feeder buses or shuttle service (including on-demand services) to bring transit riders to rail stations. This could include a shuttle that loops downtown at a high frequency, bringing downtown workers to and from their offices, as well as buses that serve residents further in the hills.

Parking is limited throughout the planning area and there is general dissatisfaction with how parking is managed for both employees working in the area and visitors. At least one stakeholder said that proprietors in Chinatown have been known to run goods out to their customers, who are illegally parked, but cannot find a spot. Parking regulations, shared parking strategies, and rail ridership may help to better manage parking supply and demand.

OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION

There are limited open spaces in downtown and Chinatown. Surrounded by housing, Beretania Community Park's play areas and basketball courts are well used by the community. 'A'ala Park has skateboard ramps, courts, and a field that are used by youth in the community, but stakeholders agree that much of park is used by homeless people, making other community

members feel unsafe there. Fort Street Mall, as a pedestrian-only street provides opportunities for strolling and lingering, and is vibrant during community events. The River Street canal is well used by local residents and visitors, but this amenity can be improved to better connect the Chinatown Station to Foster Botanical Gardens, creating a well-landscaped pedestrian path. There are small open spaces and tables along the canal, many of which are not well maintained. Additionally, small plazas and open spaces are scattered throughout downtown and Chinatown. Stakeholders would like to see more open spaces, but only if they are well maintained.

4 Next Steps

Preparation of the Downtown Neighborhood Transit-Oriented Development Plan is proceeding with an integrated community outreach and technical analysis process. The input gathered during the stakeholder interviews will be combined with other outreach efforts described below to inform the plan:

- **Community Workshops:** workshops will be held at key stages of the process to provide a forum to share ideas, concerns, challenges, and opportunities.
- **Community Needs Assessment Survey:** a survey will solicit input from a sample of residents about the community's needs.
- **Advisory Committee:** a committee composed of community representatives will meet during key stages of the process to refine the community vision, discuss the purpose and outcomes of community workshops, provide input to evolving plan ideas, and review work products.

These outreach efforts are complemented by technical analyses that will result in the following documents:

- **Existing Conditions Report:** this report will document and respond to community needs and priorities identified during early/initial community outreach activities; and provide a summary of existing conditions, opportunities, and challenges related to land use, urban design, transportation, infrastructure, and economic markets.
- **Project Area Vision and Principles:** this product will synthesize concepts and objectives expressed during early community outreach activities, providing a framework for policy development and the reports described below.
- **Station Area Alternatives Report:** this report will document and analyze three alternative concepts based on ideas emanating from the opportunities and challenges described in the Existing Conditions Report and direction from community outreach activities.
- **Preferred Transit-Oriented Development Plan:** this document will briefly summarize the preferred plan for each station area, including the vision, land use, circulation, and key characteristics. The preferred plan may be one of the alternative concepts or some combination of two or more concepts.
- **Draft and Final Transit-Oriented Development Plan:** finally, the Plan will summarize the community outreach activities and interim reports described above. It will provide goals and policies for the station areas; a land use and circulation plan; TOD zoning elements; as well as implementation actions and a phasing plan.

Appendix A: List of Interviewees

Albert Lui, United Chinese Coalition
Alvin Au, Downtown Neighborhood Board #13
Anthony J. H. Ching, Hawaii Community Development Authority
Chris Sadayasu, Hawaii Community Development Authority
Davi Teves, River of Life Mission
Davis Yogi, Department of Transportation, Harbor Division
Gail, Department of Community Services
Gene Yokoi, Fort Street Mall Business Improvement District
Jeffrey Daniel Lau, Chinese Chamber of Commerce
Jim Tollefson, Hawaii Chamber of Commerce
Keith Ishida, Department of Community Services
Kevin Carney, EAH Housing
Lee Stack, Chinatown Improvement Association
Marsha Rose Joyner, ARTS District Merchants Association
Ray, Assistant to Councilmember-elect Tamayo
Rod Tam, Councilmember
Sidney Quintal, Aloha Tower Development Corporation
Tulsi Gabbard Tamayo, Councilmember-elect
Victor Lim, Fort Street Mall Business Improvement District
Wesley F. Fong, Mun Lun School
Wing Tek Lum, Lum Yip Kee, Ltd.

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