

Mining Reliable Information to Support Constructive Community Response to TOD

The Introduction

How can more neighbors say “yes” to equitable transit-oriented development? As CNT has noted, the Chicago region [has fallen behind](#) in adding affordable development around transit. The biggest barrier to eTOD is not always a lack of investment capital or supportive public policy. It can be a lack of community acceptance. Sometimes, neighbors push back over issues like parking, traffic, or building heights. At other times, preconceptions about affordable housing may spark opposition. Over time, affordable housing developers may pass over a neighborhood known for its “Not In My Backyard” opposition. This inhibits new affordable units created in some communities with excellent access to transit and jobs.

Jefferson Park, and its Jefferson Park Transit Center, are a case in point. In January of 2017, Full Circle Communities proposed a seven story, \$35 million eTOD investment with 100 units, 80 of which would be affordable for low income households. The proposed affordability mix included units affordable to households earning 30% of AMI and 60% of AMI, with rents ranging from studios at \$300 to a market rate three bedroom at \$2700. 20 of those units would be set aside for Housing Choice Voucher holders on the Chicago Housing Authority wait list. Approximately half of the units would be set aside for veterans and ten units would be wheelchair accessible. The proposal included 51 three-bedroom units, 17 two-bedroom units, 22 one-bedroom units, and 10 studios.

Along with this residential component of the project, Full Circle also proposed to subdivide the property and build an adjacent storage facility. The entire project would replace a vacant light industrial building. Full Circle Communities had an option on the land. However, because of the new and mixed-use character of the project, Full Circle needed to obtain a zoning change to advance the housing component of the project as a planned-unit development (PUD).

Constructed in 1970, the station offers access to transfers to CTA bus, CTA rail, Metra rail, and Pace Bus. It is the largest hub for transit service on the northwest side of Chicago. Its 15 transit routes provide an easy ride to downtown, O’Hare Airport, Skokie Village Crossing, three industrial corridors, and numerous other destinations in northern Cook County. A worker can use these lines to reach 736,298 jobs within 30 minutes, substantially more when [compared to other locations](#) in the area. However, the immediate neighborhood of the Transit Center contains very little multi-family housing; much of the land area is occupied by single story commercial and industrial buildings, some of which are vacant.

Jefferson Park also does not have many affordable housing units, which has squeezed the budgets of many community residents and limited access to the Transit Center for lower income households. Within the Jefferson Park Community Area, 20% of households earn less than \$25,000. More than 4 in 10 (41.5%) of renters in the neighborhood are rent burdened, or spend more than 30% of their yearly income on housing. Despite this need for more affordable rental housing, the neighborhood only possesses 73 low income housing units. And Jefferson Park does not have a single unit of housing accessible to those with disabilities.

While the proposal was not ultimately successful, there were many lessons learned about how to effectively use data and information that contribute to constructive community discourse. This case study documents the attempt of Full Circle and a coalition led by Chicago Housing Initiative to counter opposition to the project with organizing and positive, fact-based messaging using data, organizing, and research. This study documents those lessons learned to help more transit-served communities organize a positive and supportive response to affordable development, using data in CNT's eTOD Social Impact Calculator and organizing strategies on the ground.

The Organizing Effort

In late January, Full Circle Communities and Alderman John Arena held a kickoff meeting for the project, which encountered community pushback. About 500 community members attended, many of whom represented homeowner associations and other neighborhood groups. While Alderman Arena held the meeting to be transparent and upfront with his constituents, it left Full Circle with limited time to meet with these stakeholder organizations in advance. After the announcement of the meeting, these groups met independently and began to circulate opinions about the project in the absence of its details. By the time of the meeting, many of those who attended had decided, in advance, to oppose it. Full Circle carefully presented the project, but the sentiment of the room was strongly against it.

A message of opposition began to circulate throughout the community. On social media and online media, commenters shared divisive rhetoric about the perceived impacts of the project. Some comments focused on building height, density, parking, and other issues. Many comments made claims about crime and adverse impact on schools that the building would supposedly bring.

The heated rhetoric inspired an organizing effort in support of the project. The Chicago Housing Initiative (CHI) began organizing on the ground, canvassing door to door. Soon after, a new group focused on housing on the northwest side, Neighbors for Affordable Housing, came together. NFAH and CHI continued to identify supporters in the neighborhood. NFAH also tracked social media, responded to comments from the opposition, and identified additional supporters turned off by the divisive tone of online debate. Over the spring, NFAH identified 350 supporters from the community. Many of these supporters had not been engaged in development in the area in the past.

The Lessons Learned

Though the project has not advanced, the reaction and counter-organizing effort led by NFAH highlighted several lessons for future affordable housing projects, especially those that benefit from superior transit access.

Engage early, often, and at a pace that aligns with the project. Full Circle Communities and Alderman Arena held a community meeting early in the predevelopment process. While this followed the Alderman's policy for transparency, Full Circle had limited time to meet with stakeholder groups or



advocates to build neighborhood support before the meeting occurred. Additionally, the CHI and NFAH had yet to coalesce and independently identify and rally supporters. Though the YIMBY coalition did eventually come together, early engagement allows partners to develop a shared message and timeline for project approval. Coordination can help organizers and subject matter experts hone this support case in advance of public meetings.

Data matters. Neighbors may object to an eTOD proposal because of worries about density, traffic, parking, or other project components and impacts. In neighborhoods that have not experienced much TOD, such as Jefferson Park, some resistance could reflect uncertainty over a new and more intensive type of development. Regardless of the source of the opposition, fact-based messaging can help respond to these concerns and moderate the tone of discussion with other stakeholders and elected officials.

For example, at the Zoning Committee hearings, subject matter experts provided quantifiable estimates on the project's need [for off-street parking](#) and impact on retail spending within the community. While this testimony did little to change the mind of the strongest objectors, it stood in contrast to the divisive tone of the NIMBY messages and built support among community residents and elected officials in the room. Importantly, numbers and facts can help empower quieter voices to speak up in support during a community meeting and demonstrate broader acceptance than there might seem to be at the outset.

Don't give up. The loudest voices against an affordable housing development may come early, but that does not mean that they reflect the majority opinion within a neighborhood. Over time, on the ground engagement can give supportive residents a voice. Over time, CHI and NFAH identified and organized residents to begin attending meetings in support of 5150 N. Northwest Highway.

Community decisions can unfold on social media. Community members can use platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and website comment sections to engage with one another as soon as a project is proposed. Before Full Circle had an opportunity to meet individually with local stakeholders, residents took to social media platforms. This reaction had accelerated by the time of the initial community meeting and caught the attention of citywide and regional media before organizers had the ability to coordinate and respond. Online messaging has become as important as approaches at community meetings and on the ground.

Conclusion

5150 N. Northwest Highway demonstrates that even in a divisive environment, it is possible to generate a positive fact-based argument that say "Yes" to equitable development. After a kickoff meeting with tremendous opposition, the coalition led by NFAH and CHI used data-based messaging and on-the-ground organizers to identify and rally others in community in support of the project. NIMBYism is one of the biggest systemic barriers to accelerating affordable housing in areas of opportunity, including those with great access to transit. With the support of advocates, an organizing strategy, and data such as that provided by CNT's Calculator, we can help more neighbors say, "Yes In My Backyard" to equitable transit-oriented development.