Walkable neighborhoods and transit-oriented development (TOD) have developed somewhat of a “cool” factor in recent years, and the benefits of TOD have been widely researched and documented. Yet how do we ensure that populations who need access to low cost transportation choices the most are able to benefit from living and working in neighborhoods built around them? This paper uses the Denver region’s Mile High Connects collaborative as a case study of how collaboration and partnerships can support equity in community and transportation planning processes, especially in places expecting new transit service and TOD in coming years. The paper begins with a brief overview of the Denver region’s current transit expansion and the opportunities and challenges it presents, and then details the efforts of the Mile High Connects partners to become involved in and advocate for equity with one collective voice. It will highlight the Denver Regional Equity Atlas, a compendium of maps and stories that spatially document the region’s opportunities and challenges as the transit system expands, as well as some of the collaborative’s policy and funding “wins” so far. The paper will end with some of the key takeaways that have emerged from this collaboration and provide recommendations for how other regions might benefit from similar partnerships. In these times of dwindling resources, collaborations and partnerships are essential to those who care about social equity and changes to the built environment that benefit the quality of life of everyone.
Abstract
Walkable neighborhoods and transit-oriented development (TOD) have developed somewhat of a “cool” factor in recent years, and the benefits of TOD have been widely researched and documented. Yet how do we ensure that populations who need access to low cost transportation choices the most are able to benefit from living and working in neighborhoods built around them? This paper uses the Denver region’s Mile High Connects collaborative as a case study of how collaboration and partnerships can support equity in community and transportation planning processes, especially in places expecting new transit service and TOD in coming years. The paper begins with a brief overview of the Denver region’s current transit expansion and the opportunities and challenges it presents, and then details the efforts of the Mile High Connects partners to become involved in and advocate for equity with one collective voice. It will highlight the Denver Regional Equity Atlas, a compendium of maps and stories that spatially document the region’s opportunities and challenges as the transit system expands, as well as some of the collaborative’s policy and funding “wins” so far. The paper will end with some of the key takeaways that have emerged from this collaboration and provide recommendations for how other regions might benefit from similar partnerships. In these times of dwindling resources, collaborations and partnerships are essential to those who care about social equity and changes to the built environment that benefit the quality of life of everyone.
Introduction
Walkable neighborhoods and transit-oriented development (TOD) have developed somewhat of a "cool" factor in recent years, with planners, elected officials, academic researchers, real estate developers, and the business community alike embracing the return of our inner cities and pronouncing the death of the suburbs. Populations young and old are rediscovering the "lost" modes of walking, bicycling and taking public transportation, and recent research and surveys keep finding that many people actually prefer living in walkable neighborhoods over sprawling suburban ones, and that younger populations are not driving as much as previous generations.¹ Even the public health community has jumped on board, finding a link between the built environment and many of the chronic diseases (especially obesity) currently plaguing our society.

The case for walkable neighborhoods and TOD has largely been made. Yet often left out of this casemaking is exactly who should benefit. Demand for TOD in existing neighborhoods is growing faster than developers can keep up with it, and studies show that more walkable neighborhoods tend to have higher property values.² How, then, do we ensure that the populations who need access to low cost transportation choices such as walking, bicycling and public transportation the most are able to live in a neighborhood built around these modes? Will low income and minority populations currently living in walkable, transit-rich locations be able to remain there as their neighborhoods undergo change, or will increased demand to live there force them out? Will small businesses be displaced by national chains who can afford to pay the increased rents in increasingly walkable, transit-oriented neighborhoods? If increasing walking, bicycling and transit use can improve health outcomes but also encourage gentrification and displacement of the groups most at risk for chronic disease, then are we really promoting public health with TOD? These questions reveal a pressing need to address equity as our cities start shifting resources to smart growth development. We need policies and strategies that preserve and create affordable housing, support small businesses and connections to middle-skill jobs, connect people to quality educational opportunities, promote healthy food and physical activity. We need resources that make our communities complete for everyone from all walks of life.

Building capacity and consensus around all of these issues within the development context is ambitious and requires a level of collaboration that many communities and regions have not achieved. This paper makes the case for collaboration as the future of equity in our communities, especially as demand for walkable neighborhoods and TOD catches fire. It uses the Denver region’s Mile High Connects collaborative as a case study. The paper begins with a brief overview of the Denver region’s current transit expansion and the opportunities and challenges it presents, and then details the efforts of the Mile High Connects partners to become involved in the planning processes surrounding this expansion as one collective voice. It will highlight the Denver Regional Equity Atlas, a compendium of maps and stories that visualize the region’s opportunities and challenges as the transit system expands, as well as some of the collaborative’s “wins” so far. The paper will end with some of the key takeaways that have emerged from this collaboration and provide recommendations for how other regions might benefit from similar partnerships.
FasTracks: The Denver Region’s Transit Expansion Opportunity
The Denver region is currently embarking on one of the most ambitious and extensive investments in new rail and bus service in the United States. In 2004, voters approved a 0.4% sales tax increase to fund the construction of 122 miles of new fixed-guideway rail (a combination of light rail and commuter rail) and 18 miles of bus rapid transit on nine corridors (six new corridors and extensions of three existing ones). This investment has the potential to expand the reach of opportunity for many people, providing better connections between housing, jobs and other essential destinations. New service will provide more transportation options to parts of the region where congestion and its side effects have become incredibly costly and time-consuming. Other regions are watching closely to see how the network is built out and if transit can spur new development and redevelopment of existing assets in station areas. Anticipation of transit service has led many of the region’s cities and counties to prepare land use plans for new stations over the past few years, with transit-oriented development (TOD) as the key outcome. While the economy has slowed the amount of sales tax revenue pouring in to pay for this investment, and construction costs have almost doubled, several lines are under construction and expected to open within the next one to four years, making this a prime time for groups who care about social equity to intervene in the planning process and make sure this investment benefits everyone.

Enter Mile High Connects
Given this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and a generous grant from the Ford Foundation’s Metropolitan Opportunity Unit, a coalition of over twenty local and national nonprofits, foundations and community lenders with significant experience in affordable housing, economic and workforce development, educational opportunities, community engagement, access to transit alternatives and healthy living have joined forces to advance a common mission: to ensure the metro Denver regional transit system fosters communities that offer all residents the opportunity for a high quality of life. Called “Mile High Connects” (MHC), this collaborative is engaging in collective and targeted efforts to shape programs and policies that implement equitable TOD and give everyone a voice in the planning processes that affect their communities. Many of MHC’s members have been focused on these issues for years, but have never worked together in a coordinated fashion before, often viewing their issues in isolation. Through MHC, these groups are able to leverage their voices and align their resources to accelerate the policy and systems changes they all hope to achieve. MHC is intentionally modeled after similar collaboratives in the Twin Cities and Bay Area regions, which have been working together around equitable TOD issues for many years. Several MHC members have been participating in those collaboratives and saw the opportunity to bring that idea to Denver. With philanthropic support and local interest among the partners, MHC was able to come together relatively quickly and get to work.

The Regional Equity Atlas Makes the Case
One of the first things MHC set out to do was to develop a tool to communicate the importance of equity in the development of new transit service and the neighborhoods surrounding current and future bus stops and rail stations. The collaborative set up a
Research and Evaluation committee that looked at what other regions had done, and decided to follow a model developed in Portland, Oregon: the Regional Equity Atlas. Over the course of a year, the committee, led by Reconnecting America and the Piton Foundation, developed a series of maps and stories that spatially demonstrate the enhanced connections that the new transit service will provide. The Equity Atlas contains 31 maps, each one with the transit route map as the base layer, across five categories: demographics, housing, jobs, education and health. Data was collected for seven counties in the Denver region (Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Broomfield, Denver and Jefferson counties) and analyzed down to the lowest geography available. Geographic information system (GIS) software was used to spatially analyze the data and produce maps illustrating the findings.

MHC released the Atlas in April 2012 at a Launch event for the collaborative itself. It received local and national attention from the press, and has started a conversation about equity in circles that have never talked about it before. Some of the Atlas’ key findings were that the region is more interdependent than people realize, and that many of the region’s lowest income households and communities of color remain the most disconnected from opportunity. While FasTracks will improve connections for some of these households, it may also promote gentrification and displacement in their neighborhoods and force them to move to other parts of the region where public transportation service is less accessible. Moreover, many of the region’s job centers and educational opportunities are adjacent to but not oriented toward transit and thus people may not be able to use transit to get to work or school unless communities or the employers themselves improve the last mile connections to them, like shuttle service, sidewalks with lighting and bicycle sharing. Low income and minority populations are in many cases also living in communities far from these jobs and schools, and new transit service will not make their commutes any easier.

Altogether, the Atlas’ findings reveal that the region is at a critical point in its FasTracks investment, and unless groups such as MHC intervene to ensure that this transit expansion benefits everyone, the opportunity will be lost forever. The Atlas is helping to make that case in MHC’s outreach efforts, but without policies and resources to implement equitable TOD, its vision remains an illusion.

Funding & Policy Wins
Realizing that planning and policy decisions were being made very fast around FasTracks in communities around the region, MHC members have also been getting more involved in these discussions, and have brought a collective voice to processes that before were only followed by a handful of advocates. One of the biggest wins so far has been the Denver region’s successful grant application to HUD for a Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant in 2011. HUD awarded the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) $4.5 million to work on regional, corridor and site-level activities near transit stations, with a strong focus on equity and stakeholder engagement across these activities. After DRCOG was not successful in 2010, MHC members funded a facilitator and grant writer to help with the 2011 application. The foundations and financial institutions that comprise MHC also put up matching funds for
the grant activities. MHC members participated on a Coordinating Committee with DRCOG throughout the two-month application process, and were able to insert themselves and their issues into many of the proposed activities. The grant will fund regional housing and economic development plans, three corridor plans created by multi-jurisdictional, cross-sector working groups, and four site-level catalytic projects that support equity and ensure resources are allocated toward places where it is most strategic and beneficial. There is also funding to build an interactive web-based version of the Regional Equity Atlas. Several months later, MHC received a $250,000 grant from Living Cities to study economic development strategies in the region that could support small businesses near transit and connect middle-skill workers to job opportunities. This grant has expanded collaboration further by allowing MHC to set up a Jobs Working Group made up of workforce and economic development leaders, small business advocates, and community organizers. Getting these diverse groups to sit at the same table has been a major coup for MHC, and has built relationships among groups that have traditionally been at odds with each other. MHC members are now working to put together working groups of health, education and housing leaders to build capacity in those arenas.

Mile High Connects is also investing in bricks-and-mortar developments near transit stations through the TOD Fund. MHC members Enterprise Community Partners and the Urban Land Conservancy established the Fund in 2010 with assistance from the City & County of Denver and national banks, including U.S. Bank, Wells Fargo and First Bank (who are all also MHC members). MHC member bank J.P. Morgan Chase made a complimentary investment in Enterprise’s Community Loan Fund, aiming to spark regional preservation, in 2011. The fund was the first of this type in the country, and is promised to support the creation and preservation of up to 1,000 affordable housing units through strategic property acquisition in current and future transit corridors. Through the Fund, the partners are able to seize the opportunity to acquire key properties, both vacant and operating, as demand for housing near transit gradually grows for all income levels, but before the anticipated tidal wave of demand, as the region’s transit system becomes fully operational. Since its start-up in April 2010, the TOD has purchased property that will eventually create or preserve 404 affordable units (352 new and 52 existing) at six sites. While this fund only applies to properties within the City of Denver at the moment, MHC is using its resources to explore making it a regional fund.

Community Engagement
While some level of public engagement is inherent in the planning process, the typical public meeting does not reach everybody and is often dominated by a select few with the time and resources to attend and influence the outcome. In low income and minority communities, getting residents engaged around an issue like TOD is a significant challenge, even though it has the potential to significantly affect their neighborhood. MHC is fortunate to have experts in Denver-based community engagement among its members who are helping to ensure these traditionally excluded groups have a say in what should happen to their communities as FasTracks makes its way through them. FRES: Good Jobs, Strong Communities is working in many of the communities
along the transit corridors to educate them on the planning process and also understand these communities. What do people need? What do their communities lack? Are they afraid of being displaced by the transit buildout? MHC wants residents who are impacted by the growing transit system to be involved every step of the way – from providing input on planning, to supporting a shared vision for inclusive communities. Through the Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant, FRESC and other MHC members will have the resources to engage these residents and make sure their needs and desires are part of the plans for their communities. Other community organizing groups have also received small grants from MHC to canvass transit-oriented neighborhoods and collect information from residents about where they work, shop and take their kids to school. These community engagement activities will be critical to ensuring that MHC is accurately representing the interests of these groups in its education and advocacy efforts, as fundamentally, these are the people who will be the most affected by the transit buildout and have the least amount of power to influence the outcomes.

The Big Picture: Collaboration is the Way of the Future for Social Equity
Mile High Connects is still in its infancy but has seen major progress in just the past two years on many of the issue areas that its member organizations have been working on for years. MHC has been able to increase resources to groups who are on the ground working on the issues of housing, jobs, education and health, as well as develop its own body of research and communication materials that make the case for why equity is important to community development. MHC has also brought adverse groups together to work on common issues such as jobs and housing where there was no common ground before. The synergy that results from new, different, diverse partners uniting around a shared vision for success is helping to shape a better future for Denver’s communities, one where everyone will have access to the walkable, transit-oriented neighborhoods that are the future of the Denver region and many other cities around the country.

In these times of dwindling resources, collaborations and partnerships are essential to those who care about social equity. By working together and speaking with one collective voice, decisionmakers are more apt to listen and care. As demand for walkable neighborhoods and TOD increases, processes will be increasingly underway to plan and build them, and it is essential for those who are affected most to be involved in these discussions and have the power to influence the outcomes. The Denver region provides just one example of how to structure collaboration, and there are many other great models out there. The Twin Cities and Bay Area collaboratives that Mile High Connects is modeled upon have different players and priorities. The puzzle is different in every region, as are the pieces that comprise it. Making sure all the pieces are included in the final picture requires a concerted effort beyond what any one individual organization can do, and as our regions grow in population and diversity, it only gets more complex. But collaboration is the way of the future for those who care about equity, no matter the size or scope of the issues a community faces. Only by working together can communities large and small see changes that will benefit the quality of life of everyone.
ENDNOTES


2 See, for instance, a recent Brookings Institution study on walkable neighborhoods in Washington, DC: http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/05/25-walkable-places-leinberger

3 RTD, What is FasTracks?: http://rtd-fastracks.com/main_26

4 RTD, Financing FasTracks: http://rtd-fastracks.com/main_33

5 See the Mile High Connects website for more information about the collaborative: http://milehighconnects.org/main.html

6 See the Great Communities Collaborative http://www.greatcommunities.org/ and Central Corridor Funders Collaborative websites http://www.funderscollaborative.org/

7 More information on Portland’s Equity Atlas is available here: http://equityatlas.org/

8 For more information on Reconnecting America, visit their website: http://www.reconnectingamerica.org/

9 For more information on the Piton Foundation, visit their website: http://www.piton.org/

10 The full Equity Atlas is available here: http://milehighconnects.org/equity-atlas.html


13 More information on DRCOG's grant proposal and workplan here: http://drcog.org/index.cfm?page=SustainableCommunitiesPlanningGrant

14 More information on DRCOG's grant proposal and workplan here: http://drcog.org/index.cfm?page=SustainableCommunitiesPlanningGrant

15 For more information on Living Cities and their TOD initiatives, visit their website: http://www.livingcities.org/

16 For more information on the Urban Land Conservancy, visit their website: http://www.urbanlandc.org/denver-transit-oriented-development-fund/

17 For more information on Enterprise Community Partners, visit their website: http://www.enterprisecommunity.org/

18 For more information on the Urban Land Conservancy, visit their website: http://www.urbanlandc.org/

19 For more information on FRESC: Good Jobs Strong Communities, visit their website: http://www.fresc.org/