



There's Nothing Coercive About Walkable Neighborhoods

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The *Wall Street Journal* [reports](#) that Denver's transit officials are changing the planning around the new light rail stations they'll be building over the next decade. Instead of surrounding each station with a sea of parking, the city is going to "encourage the development of dense, walkable villages around stations so people don't have to drive to use the system."

My Cato colleague Randal O'Toole [doesn't think much of this plan](#):

Under RTD's latest "rethink," transit will no longer take people from where they are to where they want to go. Instead, planners will try to coerce and entice people to live in places served by rail transit and go where those rail lines go. On one hand, this is far more intrusive on people's lifestyles; on the other hand, it is a far more limited view of the purpose of transit. Instead of "mobility for those who can't or don't want to drive," the new purpose is "mobility for those who are willing to completely rebuild their lifestyles around transit."

Note the implicit assumption here. Personally, I've been living in dense, walkable neighborhoods for most of the last decade. So moving to the kind of neighborhood Denver is trying to build around its transit stops wouldn't require a significant change in *my* lifestyle. Scrapping parking lots in favor of that style of development only looks coercive if you start with the assumption that a car-oriented suburb is the ideal to which everyone aspires.

The *Journal* is a little vague on exactly which policy levers planners are using to "encourage" walkability, but as near as I can tell the big one is *not* requiring the construction of parking spaces adjacent to the station. Presumably they're also going to *not* impose the kind of restrictive single-family zoning that's typical for suburban development, so that developers have the option of building more densely. It's possible the planners are also using other measures, such as subsidies, to entice developers to build nearby, but if so the *Journal* doesn't say.

And that's the important question. If the plan is to dump government-owned parking garages and instead sell the land to private developers, that's a clear win from a free-market perspective. And if planners liberalize zoning rules to allow high-density construction that's illegal in most suburbs, so much the better. On the other hand, if the plan is to actively subsidize or even require dense development, *that* is worth criticizing. But it's important to be clear that the problem is coercive means, not the goal of providing more walkable neighborhoods.