



ULI TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

# TACOMA DOME DISTRICT TRANSIT ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

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**Urban Land  
Institute**  
Northwest

## ABOUT ULI NORTHWEST

ULI Northwest is a District Council of the Urban Land Institute (ULI), a non-profit education and research organization supported by its members. Founded in 1936, the Institute today has more than 44,000 members worldwide. ULI members represent the full spectrum of land use planning and real estate development disciplines working in the private, public, and non-profit sectors.

ULI's mission is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. ULI Northwest carries out the ULI mission locally by serving as the preeminent real estate forum in the Pacific Northwest, facilitating the open exchange of ideas, information, and experiences among local, national, and international industry leaders and policy makers.

Our mission is to:

- Build a regional vision of the Northwest that embraces and acts upon quality growth principles.
- Encourage collaboration among all domains—public and private—of the real estate industry.
- Build consensus among industry and public leaders who influence land use, transportation, environmental, and economic development policies.

## ABOUT THE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL (TAP) PROGRAM

The ULI Northwest Technical Assistance Panel program brings together a select, independent panel of experts to provide a fresh perspective on complex, local public and private development problems. Panelists represent a variety of professional and academic fields relevant to the issues at hand, including real estate development, planning and design. Panel members donate their time over two days to study the local context, focus on the issues presented to them by the hosting organization, perform limited research, deliberate, and agree upon a specific but limited set of recommendations addressing the problems and opportunities found by the panel. The subsequent report is a presentation of those recommendations and the priorities for action the panel finds appropriate.

## ABOUT THE TAP REPORT

The TAP report is a summary of findings of one ULI Northwest Technical Assistance Panel, covering a particular study area. As such, it is not a plan or a feasibility analysis. Responsibility for further analysis and implementation of any panel recommendation lies with the hosting organization and/or its partners.

## Contact Us



ULI Northwest  
107 Spring Street  
Seattle, WA 98104  
206.224.4500  
northwest@uli.org  
northwest.uli.org

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# Panelists



John Hempelmann  
Panel Chair  
Chairman, Cairncross &  
Hempelmann



Lyle Bicknell  
Principal Urban Designer, City  
of Seattle / O.P.C.D.



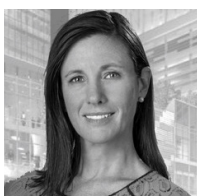
Erin Christensen  
Ishizaki  
Partner, Mithūn



David Cutler  
Partner, Northwest Studios



Michael George  
Senior Project Manager, Kidder  
Matthews



Kelly Kost  
Retail Strategist, Downtown  
Works



Doug Larson  
Principal & Project Director,  
Heartland LLC



Al Levine  
Affiliate Faculty & Lecturer,  
University of Washington  
Runstad Center



Ali Modarres  
Dir. of Urban Studies,  
Assistant Chancellor of  
Community Engagement,  
UW-Tacoma



Rick Mohler  
Principal, UW Associate  
Professor of Architecture,  
Mohler + Ghillino Architects



Gareth Roe  
Director of Business  
Development / Land-Use  
Planner, BCRA



Jill Sherman  
Partner, Gerding Edlen



Cammy Wittrell  
President, Horizon  
Partners

# Acknowledgments

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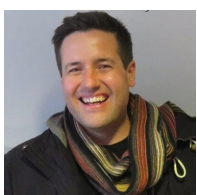
## Support Team



**Martha Cox**  
Architect, Mithūn



**Clair Enlow**  
Professional Writer,  
Journalist, Columnist



**Andres De Wet**  
District Council Manager,  
ULI Northwest



**Victoria Oestreich**  
Project, Program Manager,  
ULI Northwest

# Executive Summary

The Tacoma Dome District (the District) is positioned to attract a significant part of anticipated population growth in the Tacoma metropolitan area and the region. Decisions made today will help determine who lives here now and in the future, how they live, and how visitors spend their money.

The District is the state's foremost transit hub. It is served by Sound Transit commuter rail and Pierce Transit buses. It is the terminus of Tacoma's own light rail line, Tacoma Link. In addition to these services, the District has regional connections that bring intercity transit-riders from Thurston, King, and Kitsap Counties and interstate transit services provided by AMTRAK and Greyhound. The arrival of (Pierce Transit) Bus Rapid Transit in 2022 and Sound Transit's Link Light Rail Extension in 2030 will multiply visitor numbers. The light rail extension will also provide a convenient alternative to driving for eventgoers arriving from cities to the north, connecting the Tacoma Dome to the regional light rail network with direct access to SeaTac Airport and Seattle.



Aerial photo of the TAP study area.

All of this has made the District an important focus of transit-oriented development (TOD) for the City of Tacoma (the City) and for the region. The District has a prominent role in plans like the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) Vision 2040, the City's One Tacoma and South Downtown Subarea Plan. At the same time, the District remains connected to the region's highway infrastructure through its proximity to I-5 and through the visibility of the Tacoma Dome, a longstanding entertainment venue.

No matter where they work, millennials and young families show a preference for living near transit and also seek affordable housing opportunities. All of this brings demand for housing and jobs, as well as pedestrian-oriented retail, to the District. Yet, land available for development is very limited. The City and the growing neighborhood in the District must make the most of the area, including land in the path of light rail.

Sound Transit's Tacoma Dome Link Station design is under environmental review as part of its planning and permitting process. The ultimate design of this station is an opportunity for the transit agency to demonstrate its commitment to transit-oriented development by leveraging transit infrastructure to benefit the growth of the neighborhood. This kind of leverage is most critical where stations are above ground.

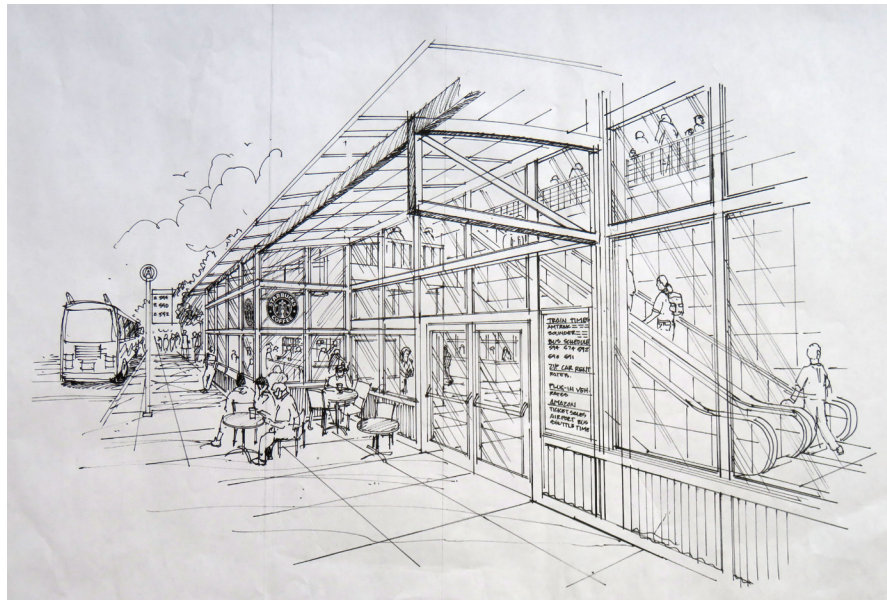
In the District, the most important decisions about the future revolve around the future light rail station, neighborhood planning, parking, zoning and affordable housing:

**Light rail station.** Based on current study and design review documents, when Tacoma is connected with the Sound Transit Link Light Rail network in 2030, the new Tacoma Dome station is likely to be elevated—including the guideway "tail" beyond the station. This is a clearly preferable alignment because an elevated station permits a cohesive neighborhood to grow around it while facilitating access to the station from various levels along the hillside. It allows for a porous condition at the ground level instead of a hard stop and barrier to all pedestrian activity. Visible choices for moving from street level to platform, including bridging and stairs, will increase transit participation and add to the appeal of the neighborhood at the same time.

**Neighborhood streets.** Because existing development is sparse and uneven, the District lends itself to a fine-grained street grid, which is especially important for pedestrian orientation and wayfinding. Such a grid is a special priority to the north and the west of the Tacoma Dome. East D Street, which runs to the west of the Dome, would be a good choice as a pedestrian spine that is also a regional multi-modal trail connection, designated for special paving or planting attention. Key intersections on the grid would include those at E. 25th Street and E. 26th Street, next to the current and future station area.

**Parking and access.** Parking is a resource that must be carefully considered, in light of the fact that much of the land in the District now devoted to parking is also the most desirable land for development. That means that dedicated parking spaces in the Tacoma Dome District on City-owned land are both an asset for the City and also, increasingly, a liability. If the City is to take advantage of this window

Transit integrated with retail. Sketch provided by BCRA.



of opportunity for creating an attractive and walkable neighborhood, it must smooth the difficult and confusing transition to a time when many of those attending events at the Tacoma Dome, a regional destination, will arrive via transit. The transition will be based on several strategies, including new forms of revenue for the Tacoma Dome, as well as alternate parking options and improved access for Tacoma Dome patrons. For example, surface lots could be replaced with long-term ground leases for developments that also include replacement parking.

**Zoning.** The City of Tacoma has already completed some studies that involve revising the zoning code to accommodate much taller and more varied buildings in the District. As it moves ahead, the City can take advantage of a growing knowledge base about transitioning from traditional to form-based zoning. Intra-district TDR (transfer of development rights) may be a key to making desirable buildings feasible for developers and preserving some smaller structures essential to character.

**Affordable housing.** The housing crisis exacerbates demand for affordable housing in Tacoma, the District and the region as a whole. Affordable housing near transit enhances the value of both investments for all, by increasing access to services and opportunity. It is also mandated by Sound Transit policy, which requires that 80 percent of suitable surplus lands be offered to affordable housing developers. As an owner of an unusually large site adjacent to light rail, the City should maximize opportunity sites, policies and funding sources to build safe, secure affordable housing into the future of the District.

Decisions made in the areas above will have far-reaching effects. The Tacoma Dome District is at a critical point in development, and there is much at stake for the City of Tacoma.

# Background

Tacoma is the second-largest city in the Puget Sound region, serving as the center of business activity for the South Sound area, which has a population of around one million. It has been an important railroad terminus since the 19th Century and is now Washington's largest port.

The Tacoma Dome District is a mostly flat area south of downtown Tacoma, sloping down to Puyallup Avenue and the rail tracks and yards, with views to downtown and its Thea Foss Waterway. It is constrained with hard boundaries on the north and south: the BNSF freight yards and Thea Foss Waterway; and Interstate 5, respectively. The Tacoma Dome, built in 1981, is a giant arena with configurable seating that accommodates a variety of events from concerts to athletic competitions. Owned and operated by the City of Tacoma's Venues & Events Department, it is a regional destination and it hosts hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. At 154 feet tall and 530 feet in diameter, its landmark dimensions and adjacency to Interstate 5 make it an orientation point and de facto symbol of the city.

Other landmark fixtures include Freighthouse Square, an arcade-style market in a shell re-purposed from the era of cross-country trains, Pierce Transit's Park-n-Ride garage (built in tandem in 1994), and the LeMay car museum (2012), a non-traditional structure designed to celebrate the auto age, stand out in a freeway-oriented environment.

In the last decades, the Tacoma Dome District has become a regional hub for public transit. Sounder commuter rail, Pierce Transit bus lines and Greyhound buses all stop there. It is a terminus for Tacoma's own light rail line, the Tacoma Link. In addition to these services, connections bring intercity transit-riders from Thurston, King, and Kitsap Counties. Already, the Tacoma Dome Station annually sees 361,000 weekday boardings and 44,196 weekend transit boardings. The arrival of the expanding Sound Transit Link Light Rail line and its Tacoma Dome Station will increase the numbers of visitors substantially and provide another alternative to driving for Tacoma Dome eventgoers. All of this has made the District a special focus of transit-oriented development for the City and the region, in plans like the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) Vision 2040, the City's One Tacoma and South Downtown Subarea Plan. Presently with more plans for the future are connections with multi-modal regional trails.

Pierce Transit's parking structure at Tacoma Dome Station



But the neighborhood is still sparsely populated. According to the City of Tacoma, 2,000 currently live within 15-minutes walking distance of the future Tacoma Dome Link station, and only 125 people live in the more critical 10-minute walkshed of the station.

Some developments are currently in planning stages or under construction. Topgolf is a golf-based amusement center based in Dallas, with 41 other locations nationwide. It is in negotiation with the City to occupy an 11-acre wedge of land along Interstate 5 and adjacent to the Tacoma Dome. Trax is a residential mixed-use development near the transit stations that will bring over 115 apartment homes and over 50 parking spaces to the area, along with a 2-story retail base that includes space for a farmer's market. This project, built on former Pierce County Transit land, is an example of transit-oriented development (TOD) on the current market. The parking supplied is less than 0.5 space per unit, and it features a rooftop garden and many other amenities. Koz Development, which specializes in microunits near transit, is constructing a 152-unit mixed-use microhousing project on Puyallup Avenue, within the District. This project includes no parking spaces.

As the builder of the Link Light Rail network, Sound Transit has committed itself to supporting design excellence as well commuter services that support mixed use and transit-oriented housing. According to Transit Board Motion M2019-77, Sound Transit will "ensure the Tacoma Dome Station represents the highest possible level of urban design and integration and catalyzes transit-oriented development in the neighborhood."

The City of Tacoma has initiated a parking demand study and a Tacoma Dome event access analysis. These studies are expected to help reformulate longstanding practices and new strategies for the management of parking supply and access to the District.

# Recommendations

As we enter a new era of multi-modal transportation, the City of Tacoma is positioned to lead the region with commuter (heavy) rail, light rail, Amtrak, and buses for commuters (Pierce Transit) and cross-country travel (Greyhound)—all connecting to towns and cities throughout Western Washington and even some in Eastern Washington. In the next decade, it will see the arrival of the expanding Sound Transit Link light rail line, with a new Tacoma Dome Station. If the District can adapt and leverage its transportation wealth into building a vibrant, attractive and affordable neighborhood, Tacoma will truly realize its title as City of Destiny. The City is preparing for growth on many fronts. At the same time, the region's light rail authority, Sound Transit, must make good on its promise to accommodate and support transit-oriented development (TOD), which really means dense, mixed-use neighborhoods that maximize the number of residents within walking distance of stations, similar to traditional urban areas around the world.

**“ Bring the character of Tacoma to the space so it does not look like it is built for someone else. ”**

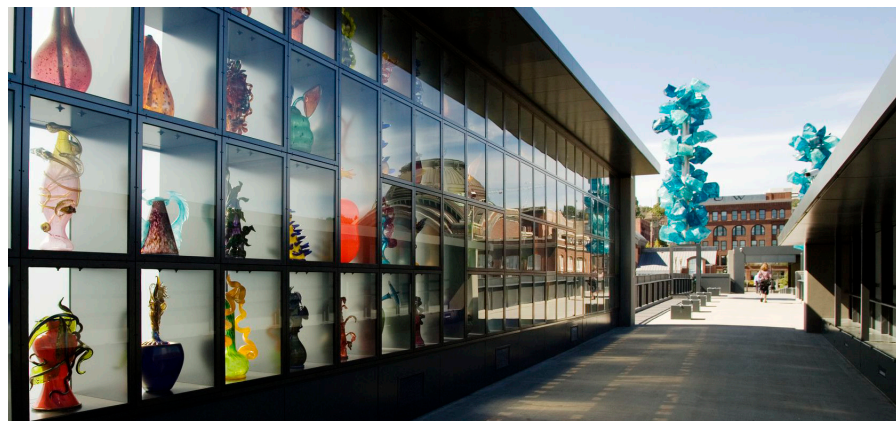
The first challenge in realizing this vision is to make sure that big transit investments truly work for the District and help to make it an attractive neighborhood. That means getting a light rail station that works—not just for transit riders who are passing through, but for people who call the District home. The station should bring the neighborhood together, not cut it in half. This can be facilitated through timely and collaborative planning. The following are the most important steps the City of Tacoma can make toward that goal:

Insist on an elevated and connected Sound Transit Station. The position and design of the station is a basis for the future of the District and the neighborhood within it, and a key component to any plan. In keeping with the stated goals of Sound Transit as well as the City of Tacoma, the Tacoma Dome Station must be a “great station.” Care must be taken to choose the best kind of station for the neighborhood and to include features which will help make

it into a leading example of “development-oriented transit” and a catalyst for development of a walkable, complete neighborhood. In other words, the station itself catalyzes transit-oriented development opportunities and is a strong influence on market demand for housing and jobs. It is essential that the transit agency work with City officials and stakeholders to achieve optimum design. It is understood that below-grade tracks and stations provide the least disruption of existing or planned development in any area, but given that this is unlikely in the District, the best Tacoma Dome Station option will be:

- **Elevated.** An elevated station will be recognizable from a distance and also allow the neighborhood to remain intact underneath it and develop around it, unlike an at-grade station. An elevated station can act as a major catalyst project only if the area beneath it is activated to support community and transit-rider retail needs and/or provide neighborhood amenities. The guideway tail must be similarly positioned to support an elevated guideway and track for any continuing buildout of the system. The guideway tail must also allow for activation and park-like features or building construction underneath to be an asset, rather than a liability, for the District. Sound Transit and the City should work together to plan and implement long-term management of these activated “under rail” spaces.
- **With bridges.** A functional and visible pedestrian bridge between the station platform and the uphill street level will add value to transit infrastructure, invite riders and welcome visitors to the Tacoma Dome and other venues. It should reach across the rail line to a landing that provides access to a new community destination, perhaps a development on the Puyallup Tribal property at E. 26th Street. City and transit agencies should work together to position and design a bridge with landings and structural capacity for art or other additions, similar to the Chihuly Bridge of Glass. Such a bridge could extend the presence of the Tribal site and link it with the station.
- **With stairs.** To make the most of the elevated station, it should be rich in visible connections to the ground plane. Vertical circulation elements

The Chihuly Bridge of Glass in downtown Tacoma (Getty Images)



are essential to access and multi-modal transit integration. They enhance light rail use and convenience, as well as visibility. This would include, at least, a large and prominent elevator and two stairways, in addition to the standard escalator. Design should also facilitate bike access between all levels, and demonstrate the principle of redundancy.

Integrate transit with a readable, reassuring street grid. The District's sparse population, uneven development pattern, mostly flat topography and underused land all present an unusual opportunity. Together, these characteristics all lend themselves to transitioning to a fine-grained, traditional street grid, complete with alleys. This is the best kind of street pattern for pedestrians and for mixed-use development, lending itself to easy and intuitive orientation and wayfinding. It also provides flexibility for incremental phasing. Making it truly readable and easy to navigate for new residents will involve choosing some streets, intersections and blocks for special treatment with paving, plantings, signage, seating and public art. All these can help to create an attractive and livable neighborhood while orienting pedestrians. There is much at stake for future visitors. Combined with places of interest, easy navigating when they disembark from transit in the District for the first time will help them feel comfortable and encourage them to return.

**“ First and foremost, create a neighborhood,  
then add an entertainment focus. ”**

In addition to the grid, a designated pedestrian and bicycle spine will help to orient and channel foot traffic. East D Street is a likely choice for that spine, because of its position immediately to the west of the landmark Tacoma Dome, its role as a regional multi-modal trail connection to the Foss Waterway and Downtown to the north and the Pipeline Trail and Foothills Trail to the south, and its adjacency to existing and planned transit stations. The intersections of E. East D Street with E. 25th Street and E. 26th Street are natural locations for pedestrian nodes, intersections marked by artwork, special treatment or plantings so that transit riders and other pedestrians, including those making their way to entertainment venues from parking places, can find their way around. Intuitive and pleasant transit integration should be the cornerstone of this regional transit hub. Special attention should be given to bicycle access and infrastructure, easy access between transit modes and the design of a public realm that supports micro-mobility. Note that the east side of the District could be retained as a light industrial area, allowing for manufacturing and other commercial uses. If Topgolf, now planned for the site just to the east of the Tacoma Dome, does not get built, this particular area might be designated a mixed-use neighborhood on the zoning map. Creating a master plan of the District will help articulate this vision and anchor the next steps.

**Leverage parking as a resource.** In the 1970s, the Tacoma Dome was a huge investment for the City, and it remains a viable asset for the City and for

Programmed pedestrian  
space at the Toronto  
Bentway (Future  
Landscapes)



the larger region. The vast parking lots created around the Tacoma Dome at that time are a central part of meeting the ongoing need for parking capacity for eventgoers. Since they were built, the many surface parking spaces have been a key source of revenue. There was no other way for out-of-town visitors to attend events in the Tacoma Dome and vicinity except by driving, but that is changing. The number of visitors arriving by both transit and ride-hail services is increasing. There is pressure for development in the District, and that pressure will continue in the next decade as the extension of Link Light Rail arrives and demand for housing and other kinds of construction continues to rise. Although parking spaces are a current source of revenue, they are also becoming a liability, because of the loss of development opportunity and negative impact on a walkable urban fabric. As owner of the Tacoma Dome and its parking lots, the City is in a position to take advantage of the Dome's proximity to this transit nexus. By focusing on an activated District with an array of benefits, the City can maintain or increase its revenues. Then, as visitor demand for parking decreases, revenue can be realized with other sources, such as ground leases. For instance, transit riders that don't live in the neighborhood are an untapped market for local restaurants, bars and retail businesses, if a new neighborhood can arise.

Measures that might speed the transition include:

- Increase total revenues and replace parking income through long-term ground leases for redevelopment of parking areas.
- Include transit convenience in event marketing. Retailers, including restaurants, can advertise at the same time.
- Bundle parking passes with event tickets.
- Expand free shuttle service to and from underused parking structures downtown, where there is a surplus of parking space during event times.



TAP Panelists touring the study site.

- Formalize ridesharing and kiss-and-ride drop-off zones (and free up park-and-ride spaces) by creating a drop-off area that is well-located and also helps to reduce vehicular congestion at the Tacoma Dome. Wylie Avenue and E. 26th Street appear to be options.
- Create a Transportation Benefit District.

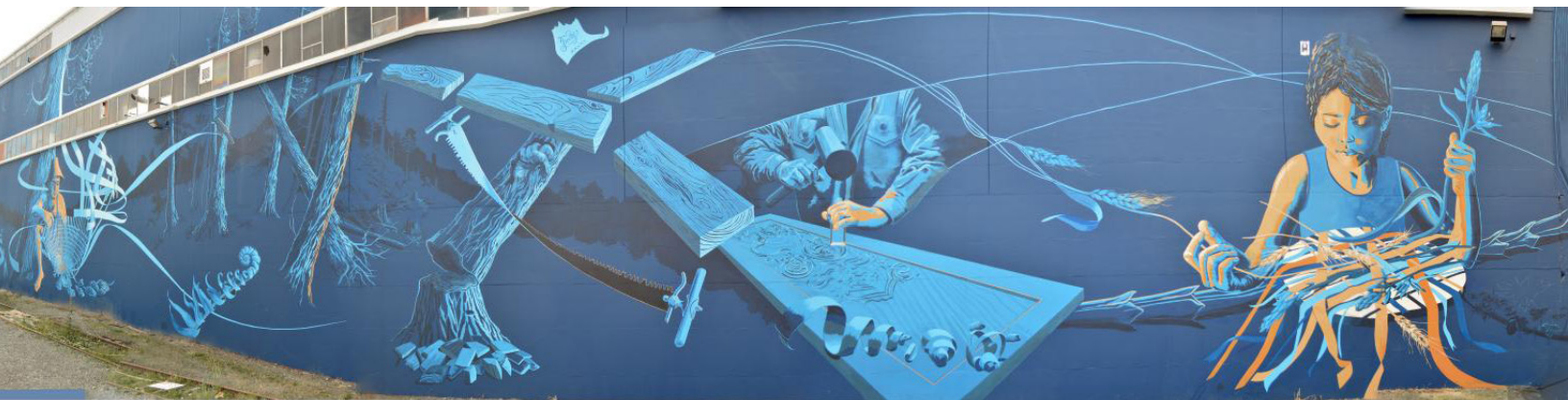
“ There is not a reason in the world that you can’t purchase parking at the same time (as tickets). ”

**Adapt and apply best practices in zoning.** Along with an evolving neighborhood street grid, District zoning should be revisited in order to support the goals of building an attractive, walkable and unique neighborhood, one with lots of housing opportunities. It may help to know what legal and regulatory steps are being taken in cities around the U.S. to achieve these same goals and related urban outcomes. Most of these involve code amendments based on building form (height and shape) rather than construction type or building use, so that the code can allow for design freedom and also accommodate a range of uses, often in the same building (mixed-use). They are being made in order to accommodate current or desired growth in an urban area, a city, a district or neighborhood, or a combination of the above. These interventions achieve certain local goals and priorities, and offer assurance to private developers who want to know what to expect in the future of an investment site and a neighborhood. Form-based code provisions, with or without more specific design guidelines, can be introduced as an addendum. Overlaying code revisions, rather than remapping, tends to work in existing city districts. If they are written with clarity of intent, development

teams can ask for, and sometimes get departures through administrative processes, without resorting to more formal processes. Design guidelines and development standards can be included.

“ ‘Grit city’ needs to celebrate its grit. ”

Along with code revisions for the District, it is important to revisit and revise the permitting process to encourage good design without creating unnecessary barriers to development. In lieu of a Design Review Board, Administrative Design Review is a more predictable and less expensive way to approve major projects. If clear intent can be achieved and communicated, this gives City staff a basis for administrative exemptions and variances. At the same time, flexibility is built into the process, pleasing diverse clients and innovative design teams. One hoped-for advantage of such a review process is removing barriers to achieving design excellence, as well as accommodating new construction technologies like cross laminated timber (CLT) and supporting traditional ones like wood frame over concrete. Taller buildings using steel and concrete or CLT allow for more quality design and fresh opportunities.



*Working Forward,  
Weaving Anew mural  
along the Prairie Line Trail  
in downtown Tacoma*

The District has a unique “gritty” character and its identity should be celebrated as the neighborhood evolves. To encourage buildings of different heights and to accommodate future market demand, the City should consider intra-district TDR (transfer of development rights), where rights are traded among landowners within the boundaries of the growth area rather than between sending sites outside and receiving sites inside the District. Such an addendum might include an inventory of eligible buildings that might otherwise be lost to private redevelopment. Other tools include the potential for an affordable commercial tenancing program that could support existing businesses and encourage them to stay in place as lease rates evolve. In summary, those charged with setting City zoning priorities for the study area should:

- Focus on the quality of the public realm over specific land uses.

- Craft design guidelines that give clear intent, to guide design review.
- Allow land use code flexibility (in the form of possibilities for variance and departure) for private developments that meet the design intent.
- Consider development standards (code requirements).
- Pair design direction with specific street typologies.

To encourage projects of specific types, like affordable housing or mixed-use residential, the City may choose offer inducements like:

- Utility connection waivers
- Expedited permit review
- Flexible development standards

**Find funding for housing at different income levels.** As the District develops, there is a risk that current residents of surrounding neighborhoods will be displaced and unable to afford market-rate housing. There is minimal risk of residential displacement in the District itself, due to its presently tiny residential population. Since lower- to middle-income citizens are likely to benefit most from access to transit, it is important that planning in the station area include site acquisition, funding, permitting and construction of affordable housing. The City should work with Sound Transit to maximize opportunity and prioritize suitable surplus lands for affordable housing development. It should actively engage with the City during the environmental review process. Benefits of new affordable housing in station areas could not be clearer—these units fulfill dual objectives of increasing ridership on mass transit as well as increasing the supply of affordable units in the area—a goal shared by nearly every county and municipality. The redevelopment of the District holds great promise for:

- Providing a mix of housing options, ones at different affordability levels.
- Taking advantage of RCW 43.63A.510, a new state law that encourages the use of land currently owned by the public to be used to support new affordable housing.
- Making use of tax credit programs. In the District, the City and its housing partners can continue using the MFTE (Multi-Family Tax Exemption) program. They can also work with local partners on sources to provide local “gap” funding for 4 % Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC).

# Next Steps & Conclusion

The following steps are keys to implementing the above recommendations:

- Actively participate in Sound Transit's EIS (Environmental Impact Statement) process for the design of the Tacoma Dome Station, considering a formal response in the upcoming Comment phase. Consider the station design as well as the impact of the guideway and tail tracks alignment, access and transit integration, small business support, and development potential for likely surplus parcels. Sound Transit staff will be advancing Station design during the work on the Draft EIS; therefore, the City and other Stakeholders should actively engage with Sound Transit staff early and often and not wait until publication of the DEIS.
- After securing necessary input (including Tribal), write guiding principles of a master plan for the District. Release an RFQ, select a consultant and begin physical planning.
- Seek partners and funding for affordable and mixed-income housing projects in the context of a plan for the larger District.
- Build on recent parking and access management studies. Consider creating a Transportation Benefit District to support new policies and incentives for parking, parking revenue and use of transit for Tacoma Dome events. There may be natural partners in the region who are also interested in these goals who could be involved in planning and funding if steps are taken to include them.

As a transit hub, the Tacoma Dome District already has a very important place in the future of the region as well as the City of Tacoma. It is sure to become even more important in the next decade, especially if it creates a transit-oriented housing market in its own right. The District is positioned to become a prominent example of positive transformation, leveraging transit demand and large regional investments to create a unique, growing neighborhood that can take charge of its own destiny. It is up to the City and its strategic partners in the region to leverage regional investment for the District and the City. This report is intended to be a key resource as the City continues to develop this agenda.



The Dome District's historic, transit-oriented character



**Urban Land  
Institute**

**Northwest**

ULI Northwest  
107 Spring Street  
Seattle WA 98104  
206.224.4500  
[northwest@uli.org](mailto:northwest@uli.org)  
[northwest.uli.org](http://northwest.uli.org)