



Northwest

# CATALYZING TRANSIT-ORIENTED COMMUNITIES

Lessons from Integrated Joint Development Technical Assistance Panels



SUMMARY OF SOUND TRANSIT TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE 2024 - 2025

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## Acknowledgments

ULI Northwest would like to thank the staff at Sound Transit, especially Kristin Hoffman, Tim Bates, Sloan Dawson and Thatcher Imboden for their excellent work across all of these Technical Assistance Panels.

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## ULI Advisory Services: National and Global Programs

Since 1947, the ULI Advisory Services program has assembled over 700 ULI-member teams to help sponsors find creative, practical solutions for complex land use challenges. A wide variety of public, private, and nonprofit organizations have contracted ULI's advisory services. National and international panelists are specifically recruited to a panel of independent and objective volunteer ULI member experts with the skills needed to address the identified land use challenge. The program is designed to help break through obstacles, jump-start conversations, and solve tough problems that need outside, independent perspective. Three- and five-day engagements are offered to ensure thorough consideration of relevant topics.

## ULI Advisory Services: District Council Programs

The goal of the ULI Advisory Services program is to bring the finest expertise in the real estate field to bear on complex land use planning and development projects, programs, and policies. Since 2006, ULI Northwest's technical assistance panel (TAP) program has assembled over 30 ULI-member teams in service of ULI's mission to provide leadership in the responsible use of land in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. Drawing from its local membership base, ULI Northwest conducts one-and-a-half-day TAPs offering objective and responsible advice to local decision-makers on a wide variety of land use and real estate issues ranging from site-specific projects to public policy questions. The TAP program is intentionally flexible to provide a customized approach to specific land use and real estate issues. In fulfillment of ULI's mission, this technical assistance report is intended to provide objective advice that will promote the responsible use of land to enhance the environment.

## About the Urban Land Institute

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) is a global, member-driven organization comprising more than 48,000 real estate and urban development professionals dedicated to advancing the Institute's mission of shaping the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide.

ULI's interdisciplinary membership represents all aspects of the industry, including developers, property owners, investors, architects, urban planners, public officials, real estate brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, and academics. Established in 1936, the Institute has a presence in the Americas, Europe, and Asia Pacific regions, with members in 84 countries.

More information is available at [uli.org](http://uli.org). Follow ULI on [X](#), [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Instagram](#).

## About ULI Northwest

ULI Northwest is a District Council of the Urban Land Institute, a nonprofit education and research organization supported by its members. 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.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past two years, ULI Northwest partnered with Sound Transit to convene a series of Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) examining the opportunities and challenges of integrating transit-oriented development (TOD) with major infrastructure investments across Seattle's expanding light rail network—specifically, for the West Seattle and Ballard Link extensions. These TAPs – held for Alaska Junction, Denny, Westlake, and Ballard Stations, along with a Finance TAP – brought together developers, financial experts, urban planners, and housing experts to assess how Sound Transit's stations could both support a mix of uses and long-term regional growth.

Across all five engagements, a clear theme emerged:

**Sound Transit has a pivotal opportunity to support local and regional growth, place-responsive development, and its transit program by investing early in station infrastructure to enable future integrated development above stations.**

Achieving this integration requires deliberate coordination, flexible policy tools, and shared risk between the public and private sectors.

The TAPs confirmed that Sound Transit's emerging Joint Development program – particularly its exploration of integrated development (i.e., "overbuild") and air-rights development opportunities – is both visionary and achievable. However, realizing its potential depends on early planning, investment, and cross-agency coordination. Each TAP underscored the need to design for overbuild opportunities, ensuring that the station can support integrated development in the future (i.e., delivered sequentially).



# EXPLORE THE FULL TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORTS

**Alaska Junction Station**  
May 2024

**Denny Station**  
August 2024

**Ballard Station**  
September 2024

**Westlake Station**  
December 2024

**Financing Infrastructure Investments**  
April 2025

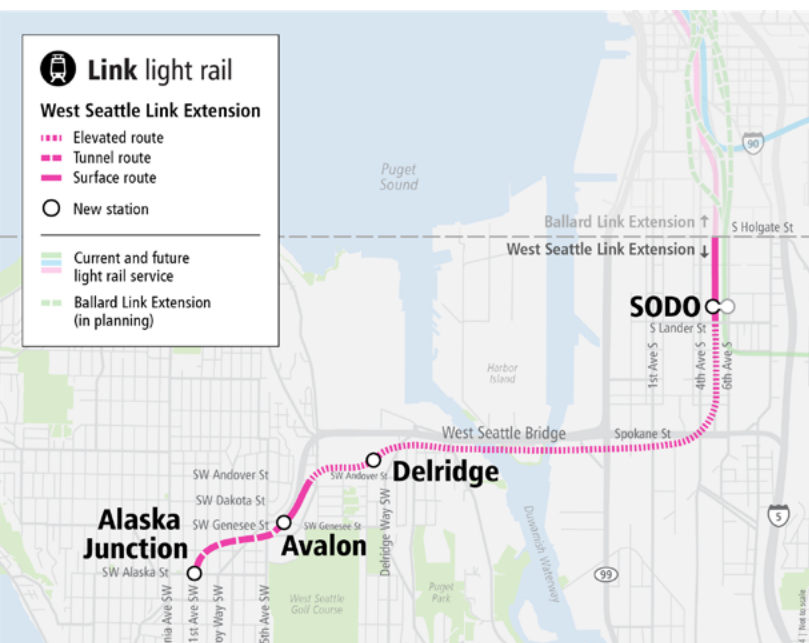




Image: Capitol Hill Station as an example of adjacent development. Image courtesy of Sound Transit.

# THE IMPACT

## Advancing an Integrated Development Approach for the Puget Sound

Through this partnership, Sound Transit and ULI Northwest have identified an approach for how to integrate transit expansion with increased density and much needed housing.

The TAP process has already yielded tangible benefits:

- **Informed decision-making:** Sound Transit's TOD and station project teams are incorporating TAP recommendations into planning for the West Seattle and Ballard Link extensions, improving readiness for future overbuilds.
- **Policy influence:** Several Seattle departments are using TAP findings to influence ongoing updates to Seattle's Comprehensive Plan and station-area frameworks.
- **Cross-sector collaboration:** Developers, financial experts, and housing advocates who participated in the TAPs have continued to engage with Sound Transit, ULI Northwest, and one another through the regional Developer Forum held in 2025.
- **Public understanding:** The TAP reports, throughout the process and as publications, are communicating to civic partners and the broader public how integrated TOD can advance shared priorities.
- **Codifying Collaboration:** Sound Transit and the City of Seattle are drafting an agreement covering roles, goals, responsibilities and key processes applying to joint development.

Together, these outcomes demonstrate that integrated joint development is achievable when design, finance, and policy are coordinated from the start. Specific recommendations and themes are summarized in the pages that follow.

# CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

The four cross-cutting themes identified throughout this collaboration are:

1. Designing for overbuild to ensure flexibility, feasibility and future value.
2. Aligning policy and zoning to enable integrated TOD.
3. Financing the vision through aligning tools, risk, and timing.
4. Building capacity for collaboration is crucial for successful partnerships and delivery.

## Designing for Overbuild: Flexibility, Feasibility, and Future Value

A recurring message across all TAPs was clear: decisions made during station design will determine the viability of future integrated development.

Panelists repeatedly emphasized the importance of “designing for overbuild now” ensuring that elements such as below-grade structures, ventilation shafts, utilities, and circulation cores are designed to support vertical development above when market conditions are favorable. **Integrated TOD above light rail stations is a once-in-a-hundred-years opportunity and Sound Transit should commit to building the infrastructure necessary to support successful overbuild TOD.** If stations are built without the necessary structural components, future development opportunities above the stations would be precluded, including in highly urbanized areas. In that case, Sound Transit would forgo the real estate value capture potential and increased ridership from such development. Moreover, without overbuild, the city would also lose potential property tax revenue and density in a developed urban area. The opportunity for a creative partnership with

the City of Seattle could be a model for TOD throughout Sound Transit’s service area.

Across sites, the panelists agreed that overbuild readiness should be treated as an infrastructure investment, not a speculative add-on. Providing the necessary reinforcement, structural elements, and footings, for example, during station construction can unlock significant long-term land value and community benefit.

- At the **Westlake TAP**, panelists urged Sound Transit to coordinate early with private developers to align structural engineering with potential tower footprints and service access, reducing costly retrofits later.
- The **Ballard TAP** similarly recommended engineering the station box for mid-rise overbuild, with provisions for future tower-scale development when market demand supports it.
- Panelists at the **Denny TAP** highlighted that intentional phasing and partnership agreements are necessary to make overbuild feasible.



Image: The University of Washington Gateway Building as an example of station overbuild. Image courtesy of Sound Transit.

## Aligning Policy and Zoning to Enable Integrated TOD

Multiple TAPs identified that even when technical feasibility exists, current zoning and permitting frameworks may not be responsive to achieving full TOD potential at new stations.

The panelists recommended that the city work closely with Sound Transit to inform the comprehensive plan updates, including Station Area Overlay Districts and Subarea Plans, needed to provide TOD-supportive zoning envelopes and more predictable entitlements.

- The **Alaska Junction TAP** recommended pursuing a significant upzone where appropriate—up to 200 feet—to maximize housing opportunities, paired with incentives to facilitate outcomes such as affordable housing. Panelists also noted that adjusting active ground floor requirements would facilitate residential development above a station.
- The **Ballard TAP** proposed the option of seeking support for legislation to create a **Station Area Overlay District** and exploring “zoning swaps” that would consolidate residential uses while maintaining industrial capacity and preventing loss of land zoned for industrial uses.
- The **Denny TAP** identified that adjusting development standards to allow for two towers on a single block face, and potentially the contribution of city right-of-way, would help maximize development outcomes.

Overall, panelists concluded that policy alignment must happen concurrently with station design, not afterward. Predictable zoning, clear entitlements, and inter-agency coordination can shorten delivery timelines, attract qualified developers, and ensure equitable outcomes.

## Financing the Vision: Aligning Tools, Risk, and Timing

Financing emerged as both the greatest opportunity for creative partnerships and the most complex barrier to realizing integrated TOD. The **Finance TAP** brought together developers, lenders, and public funders to explore how Sound Transit could finance the enabling infrastructure necessary to realize joint development along with who and how to partner with someone that has the expertise and financial capability to realize such complicated developments.

Panelists emphasized that timing is everything. The financial feasibility of overbuild depends on the interplay between the transit construction timeline and market readiness and funding availability. A lag between the two can erode value or delay housing production for years.

Key recommendations included:

- **Use Sound Transit's role as landowner strategically.** While Sound Transit is not empowered to build the TOD itself, the Agency can offer phased ground leases, predevelopment cost participation, or site preparation to reduce developer risk. Land acquisition costs may be reduced by acquiring condominium interests below grade for transit infrastructure while property owners retain air rights for future overbuild structures.
- **Leverage federal tools.** The USDOT's TIFIA and RRIF financing programs were identified as underutilized opportunities to finance eligible TOD components. (Finance TAP; Alaska Junction TAP)
- **Propose amendments to Washington's Tax Increment Financing (TIF) legislation** that would allow a sliding scale of land valuation for TIF Districts to be based on the population of the municipality.

Ultimately, the panelists urged Sound Transit to treat integrated joint development not as a single, station-by-station transaction, but as a portfolio of opportunities integral to stations with the greatest potential for overbuild and to make investments across sites to build capacity, demonstrate success, and attract capital.

### Strategies for Investments In TOD Enabling Infrastructure from Finance TAP

- Cost redistribution between Sound Transit and Municipal Agencies
- Tax Increment Financing (TIF)
- Local Improvement Districts (LIDs)
- Direct City or County Investment (as a local match to a federal grant)
- Philanthropic and Private Capital
- Public Match and Overlay Opportunities
- Additional Debt Authority

## Partnerships and Delivery: Building Capacity for Collaboration

Every TAP underscored the same principle: integrated development requires closely aligned partnerships.

The TAPs revealed that success depends not only on funding but also on alignment among city agencies, Sound Transit departments, developers, and community organizations. The complexity of designing stations, overbuild structures, and mixed-use projects in dense urban contexts requires trust, communication, and flexibility.

Panelists recommended a structured partnership model that includes:

- **Early involvement of developers.** Inviting development expertise at the 30–60% station design phase helps ensure buildable solutions, including overbuild, and realistic cost assumptions. (Alaska Junction TAP; Westlake TAP)
- **Clear Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs)** between Sound Transit and city departments to streamline permitting and sequencing of construction. (Denny TAP; Ballard TAP)
- **Dedicated agency liaisons or “ombudsmen”** to shepherd integrated projects through city review processes and interdepartmental coordination. (Alaska Junction TAP)
- **Increased Sound Transit staff capacity** to manage the ambitious series of joint development projects. Sound Transit should augment in-house capacity or explore a city or county public development authority (PDA) or public facilities district (PFD) model.

Panelists also noted the value of separating station and overbuild contracts when appropriate, using sequential delivery models to manage risk while preserving long-term integrated development opportunities. The overarching theme: early, transparent collaboration reduces uncertainty and unlocks creative opportunities for financing and development.

## Stakeholder Perspectives: Place-Making and Place-Keeping

Woven into the TAPs, interviews with local stakeholders identified that successful transit-oriented development can reinforce community identity and provide new amenities. Stakeholders emphasized that TOD should reflect neighborhood identity, preserve and enhance local business opportunities, and create welcoming public spaces that promote safety and vibrancy.

- In Ballard, stakeholders called for mixed-use development that honors the district’s unique character, while expanding family-friendly and affordable housing.
- Stakeholders for the Denny TAP stressed the importance of street-level activation and social infrastructure—childcare, cultural spaces, and public amenities that make TOD truly livable.
- At Westlake, stakeholders highlighted the opportunity to connect transit riders to a re-imagined public realm linking retail, employment, and residential uses.

## Developer Forum Insights: Market Perspectives on Feasibility and Partnership

Following completion of the five Technical Assistance Panels, ULI Northwest convened a Developer Forum bringing together private- and nonprofit-sector developers, lenders, and financial experts to test the feasibility of the TAP recommendations and discuss implementation pathways.

Participants reinforced the importance of early coordination between Sound Transit and the development community, to ensure that station design supports practical, financeable building typologies. Several key insights emerged:

- Leverage experience of successful overbuild projects and TOD in North America.
- Bring developers in early for a consultative or preliminary partnership role to ensure feasibility.
- Design flexibility and timing: Developers emphasized the need for flexible structural design that can adapt to products in different market cycles, allowing phased or future overbuild rather than committing to speculative density.
- Risk and return balance: Participants noted that integrated station development introduces unique risk – construction complexity, sequencing, and permitting – that must be offset by clear Agency partnership, such as upfront investment in predevelopment or phased land transactions.
- Policy alignment and transparency: Predictable entitlement processes and clear expectations for public benefits were identified as essential to attracting credible developer interest.
- Financial innovation: The forum encouraged Sound Transit and its partners to explore tools such as master ground leases, gap financing, expanded TIF opportunities, and expanding its access to federal loan programs such as the Build America Bureau, including its TOD-focused programs.

The Developer Forum provided a crucial reality check—validating the TAP recommendations while grounding them in market conditions. It also reinforced that the public and private sectors share a common goal of making sure that integrated joint development is implementable.

# LOOKING AHEAD

## Opportunities for Regional Progress

The work completed through this partnership between ULI Northwest and Sound Transit lays a strong foundation for the next phase of regional collaboration. ULI Northwest believes that the principles captured here point to several priorities moving forward:

- 1. Institutionalize early collaboration.** Make cross-sector partnerships a standard feature of major transit investments.
- 2. Strengthen enabling policy and finance.** Continue aligning zoning, permitting, and funding tools to advance integrated development at scale.
- 3. Measure and communicate impact.** Track progress through metrics such as housing yield, or total square feet of development, ridership, and economic vitality.
- 4. Replicate the approach.** Where applicable, plan for integrated development at other stations and jurisdictions in the Puget Sound region.

By aligning transit infrastructure with inclusive growth, the Sound Transit–ULI Northwest collaboration has shown that regional goals can reinforce one another.

In the years ahead, these lessons will continue to inform local and regional leaders as they shape communities around one of the nation’s most ambitious transit expansions. The TAPs demonstrate what is possible when technical expertise and civic purpose converge: transit-oriented communities that serve everyone.



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