

Does Living Near Transit Increase Social Capital?

New MTI research finds mixed evidence

San José, Calif., October 12, 2016 — Since the publication of *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam in the 1990s, many have argued that sprawling communities result in social isolation. Proponents of transit-oriented development (TOD) have suggested that use of transit as a commute mode could increase social interactions between neighbors and lead to increased social capital and civic engagement within a community. Researchers at the [Mineta National Transit Research Consortium](#), led by principal investigator Robert Noland, PhD, explored this issue using a 2012 survey of 8,000 households in eight New Jersey communities well served by transit.

As noted in their report, [*The Impact of Transit-Oriented Development on Social Capital*](#), the researchers received a total of 1,627 household survey responses – a response rate of 23.5%. Survey respondents completed nearly three-quarters online and the remainder by mail. Two survey questions were specifically designed to capture information related to social capital – one focused on whether the survey respondent had volunteered for a neighborhood project or organization, while the other asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with four statements geared to assess opinions about community and engagement with their neighbors.

Through a series of statistical models, the researchers explore the relationship between social capital and living in a transit-oriented development. Their findings show mixed evidence of improved social capital for people who live closer to transit. While people living near a train station tend to agree more that their community is a good place to live and that there is a greater sense of community, higher levels of employment density are associated with lower levels of social capital. In addition, respondents living in single-family dwellings had higher levels of social capital compared to those living in multi-family housing.

Dr. Noland suggests that “a more nuanced approach to TOD is needed. Planners can consider what the optimal level of population and employment are such that social capital is enhanced, yet good access to transit is still provided.” In addition, thoughtfully considering how employment locations are integrated into TODs could help alleviate some concerns associated with higher employment density. Good urban form, a careful balance between single- and multi-family dwellings, and other details such as enhanced walkability and structured civic amenities could be effective approaches to support enhanced social capital while still maintaining the density needed for quality public transit provision.

The report, available for free PDF download, is available at:
<http://transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1252.html>

ABOUT THE RESEARCH TEAM

Robert Noland, PhD is a professor at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and

Public Policy at Rutgers University and director of the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center. **Orin Puniello, MPP** is a Senior Project Manager with Ketchum Global Research & Analytics. **Stephanie DiPetrillo, M.Arch, MCRP** is Senior Research Specialist at the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center.

ABOUT THE MINETA TRANSPORTATION INSTITUTE

The Mineta Transportation Institute (MTI) conducts research, education, and information transfer programs regarding surface transportation policy and management issues, especially related to transit. Congress established MTI in 1991 as part of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act. MTI won national re-designation competitions in 2002, 2006 and 2012. The Institute is funded through the US Department of Transportation, the US Department of Homeland Security, the California Department of Transportation, and public and private grants. The internationally respected members of the [MTI Board of Trustees](#) represent all major surface transportation modes. MTI, the lead institute for the nine-university Mineta National Transit Research Consortium, is affiliated with San Jose (CA) State University's Lucas College and Graduate School of Business. Visit transweb.sjsu.edu

###

Contact:

Hilary Nixon, Ph.D.

MTI Director of Research and Technology Transfer

408.924.7564

hilary.nixon@sjsu.edu