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An easy commute

MTS agrees to trolley station apartments

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Smart growth, in a form that could be a model for transit-oriented projects throughout San Diego County, will be coming soon to La Mesa.

The Metropolitan Transit System, a residential developer and six other entities have reached agreement to build apartments and a parking structure on what is now an asphalt parking lot next to the Grossmont Center trolley station, off Fletcher Parkway.

The trolley and bus system gains potential new riders, a revenue stream for 99 years, and retains ownership of the land when the lease expires. A builder, San Diego-based Fairfield Residential, gets to do what builders are in business for. Consumers get more housing choices, this one an easy walk to Grossmont Center and Sharp Grossmont Hospital, and just three trolley stops away from San Diego State.

For trolley users, 4,900 a day at this station currently, parking will still be plentiful. But gone will be the days of climbing cliff-side stairs from the canyon-bottom trolley stop to the rim-top shopping center. An elevator and pedestrian bridge are part of the deal.

There's a lot to like about this deal.

East County and La Mesa will get 527 upscale apartments, in floor plans ranging from 616 to 1,400 square feet. Thanks to use of La Mesa redevelopment funds, some will be designated as affordable units.

The complex lend/lease deal has been more than eight years in the making for a parking lot the size of 5.5 football fields. MTS calculates the revenues it will receive over 99 years at \$635 million. In today's dollars, that is \$8 million to \$10 million. Put another way, it is also three months' worth of trolley fares.

Only a few "i's" and "t's" remain. Escrow could close in 60 days with land moving as soon as September. The first apartments are expected to be ready for occupancy 18 months later.

"It's a major revenue stream for MTS. It's also prototypical of the smart growth projects that can and should be done in the future and hopefully a lot quicker," said Ernest Ewin, La Mesa City Council member and MTS board member.

"It's a template for future projects," said Paul Jablonski, MTS chief executive. Jablonski sees a similar opportunity at the Grantville station and possibly more modest projects on smaller parcels MTS owns in the South County.

The names of the players may change – North County Transit District or SANDAG – but there are opportunities in the North County as well. Solana Beach is far along on a proposal for a parking structure, condos and a facility for the North Coast Repertory Theater at its rail station. Carlsbad is about to unveil a study on possible options at its Carlsbad Village commuter center.

In the 21st century's version of smart growth, the emphasis is not on bringing rails to far-flung suburbia. Rather, the emphasis is on drawing people to attractive live-and-work choices along transit corridors. That does seem smart.