

Factors that Drive Implementation of Equitable Land Use and Transportation Policies



Regulatory Actions

Rules and internal directives to match the policy intent of equitable transportation and land use decisions

Interviews with local practitioners, national advisors, and researchers raised a distinction between equity-focused policies that signal a new approach or a shifting value set, and those that are applied more directly within the regulatory realm. The former approach has value, as adopted policy language that acknowledges historic and present-day inequities and the intent to resolve them can catalyze new work by agencies and set important new expectations. However, policies that address how land use is managed and how infrastructure investments are distributed often need more detailed explanation in the form of **code amendments, executive orders, approved procedures, or other forms of direct guidance** to be effective; a process that is sometimes described as providing “teeth.”

Strengthening Policies through Iterative Steps: the Chicago ETOD process

The evolution of equitable transit-oriented development (ETOD) policy in Chicago is an example of a strategy becoming more embedded in the regulatory realm, along with robust guidance on its applications to city programs and decision-making, through a sustained engagement and collaborative policymaking effort. The city’s original TOD ordinance (adopted in 2013; amended in 2015) took a more voluntary approach to shaping neighborhoods within transit corridors, offering building density and parking incentives to interested developers to encourage walkable design and expanded housing supply. As a result, the original policy mostly generated activity within Chicago’s already-active housing markets in the whiter, higher-income northside and downtown, while having a negligible effect in the historically overlooked southside and westside¹. To address the impacts of the original policy, an amendment in 2019 called for this uneven geographic and social effect to be quantified and evaluated for future improvement and attached an explicit racial equity framing to the TOD policy for the first time.

What followed included the adoption of an **ETOD Policy Plan [document](#)** in 2020 that made 36 recommendations summarizing detailed findings, strategic priorities, and proposed actions, which repositioned the city's understanding and approach to TOD as a key driver of economic mobility, health and resilience, and community stabilization. The Policy Plan identified numerous refinements to make TOD regulations more effective and equitable, but also considered how the city should grow its capacity to support the ambitious, methods-changing policy. This included the standardizing of community engagement practices advanced by Elevated Chicago, the need for full-time staffing dedicated to ETOD, and the continued importance of a co-facilitated working group to plan and monitor implementation.

In 2022, a new **Connected Communities [ordinance](#)** updated Chicago's zoning code according to this emergent ETOD vision. Its adoption expanded housing and streetscape provisions to more place types and for more forms of high-frequency transit services (broadening its reach in underinvested parts of the city), while also raising affordability benefits gleaned from developer incentives. It also placed new limits on design practices (e.g. parking, curb-cuts) that do not support pedestrian safety and raise development costs. Crucially, the ordinance curtailed two practices that were exacerbating inequity in Chicago: the deconversion of multifamily housing in gentrifying neighborhoods (often near transit stations)², and the ability of local alderpersons to block or withhold zoning approvals for inclusive projects.³

Limiting Exceptions

Another challenge to equity strategies is the possibility of exceptions to adopted policies and regulations. Though unique circumstances make some amount of deviation from land use and transportation policies expectable, **overly permissive ordinance language and a lack of described parameters for granting exceptions can hurt implementation** from the beginning. When the National Complete Streets Coalition began monitoring local Complete Streets policies, they noted that many early examples were signaling this form of weak policy intent. Their [articulation](#) of strong implementation language has set a standard for better policy that community organizations, such as the Living Streets Alliance in Tucson, can point to when helping to develop their own local strategies.

Complete Streets Tucson (adopted in 2019) describes seven distinct circumstances where an exception to the [policy](#) can be granted. It also requires that requests for exceptions (whether made by private developers or by city staff) be submitted in writing with supporting documentation, with review by the Complete Streets coordinating council, and that rulings describing the basis for exceptions be made publicly available.

¹ The City of Chicago. (2021, June 15th). The City of Chicago Equitable Transit-Oriented Development (ETOD) Policy Plan. <https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/sites/etod/Pdfs/ETOD-Full-Policy-Plan-with-Appendices-6-15-21.pdf>

² Institute for Housing Studies, DePaul University. (2021, May 13). Patterns of Lost 2 to 4 Unit Buildings in Chicago. <https://www.housingstudies.org/releases/patterns-lost-2-4-unit-buildings-chicago/>

³ Chicago Area Fair Housing Alliance. (2018, July 10). A City Fragmented: How Race, Power, and Aldermanic Prerogative Shape Chicago's Neighborhoods. www.povertylaw.org/article/a-city-fragmented-2/