Neighborhoods say state shouldn't dictate development near Sound Transit light-rail stations

Proposed state legislation that would increase housing and commercial density around light-rail stations now being built or planned is drawing fire from people who think the state shouldn't dictate how neighborhoods should grow.

By Jennifer Sullivan
Seattle Times staff reporter

Like many of her neighbors in Seattle's Mount Baker neighborhood, Pat Murakami has spent years planning for the day she can leave her car in the garage and take the nearby light-rail line to the supermarket, downtown or the airport.

And the 54-year-old computer analyst hopes that once Sound Transit opens the first phase of the line in July, new homes, businesses and green spaces will begin popping up near the transit tracks, transforming Rainier Valley.

But that growth, Murakami says, should be dictated by local communities, not the state.

Murakami is just one voice among hundreds fighting a proposal in Olympia that would encourage a rapid surge of development within a half-mile of light-rail stations being built or planned from South Snohomish County to South King County, and on the Eastside.

House Bill 1490 would require about 50 housing units or centers of employment on each developable acre near the stations. Thirty-five percent of the homes or apartments must be deemed affordable housing by the state.

"I think at this point in time we have to make sure for the future we are planning to accommodate for working families in our cities and in our transit areas," said bill sponsor Rep. Sharon Nelson, D-Maury Island. "I'm trying to listen to all the concerns folks have. It's important we take this opportunity to move this forward."

Nelson said the primary objective is to ensure that low-income and affordable housing will be available when businesses and other development takes shape near the light-rail stations.

But the bill also has been pitched as a way to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions from automobiles by encouraging people to live and work near mass transit.

Nelson has the support of pro-transit group Transportation Choices Coalition, community planning group Futurewise and several environmental groups. But the opposition has left her locked in meetings with Seattle lawmakers, residents and interest groups over the last few weeks.

April Putney, political director at Futurewise, said the bill focuses on "smart growth."

"People are going to live near light-rail stations and this is helping make sure the people in those communities can still afford to live there and can get around in whatever mode [of transportation] they're choosing," Putney said.
Seattle City Councilmember Sally Clark said she's heard concerns at nearly every community meeting she's attended in recent weeks. Clark is hosting a citywide meeting to discuss the bill in Seattle's First Hill neighborhood on Wednesday.

"There are a lot of pieces of the bill that are great, but there are a lot of pieces that belong at the local level," Clark said. "I'm a big believer in grass-roots planning."

Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels, long a proponent of light rail and environmentally friendly development, has the same concern as Clark: the state mandating density in city neighborhoods.

"Obviously we're not supportive of a prescribed density requirement with a radius," said Alex Fryer, spokesman for Nickels.

Angry opinions about the measure have sprouted up on blogs dedicated to Seattle transportation, community news and housing. There is even a Facebook page dedicated to fighting it.

John Fox, of the Seattle Displacement Coalition, has led much of the charge. Fox said if the measure passes it would make already congested Capitol Hill, the University District, Roosevelt, Northgate and other neighborhoods around Sound Transit stations denser than any area north of San Francisco.

He also argues that the increased density in Southeast Seattle would dramatically change the character of the neighborhood.

"It will pre-empt station area planning that had gone on — years of work by citizens," Fox said. "All of this was done without any communication with the people who live there. This bill is a bull in a china shop ... it is arrogant."

Murakami, president of Southeast Seattle Neighborhood District Council, said she believes the increase development in her neighborhood would bring higher crime rates and the destruction of single-family homes and green spaces.

"People need yards and open space to be mentally healthy," said Murakami, who lives a half-mile from the Sound Transit station being built at Martin Luther King Jr. Way South and South Othello Street. "Are we supposed to live like sardines cramped into a can?"

Senate Majority Leader Lisa Brown, D-Spokane, said trying to ensure affordable housing is available near light-rail stations "seems like a very good policy goal."

But Brown and House Majority Leader Lynn Kessinger, D-Hoquiam, say they haven't studied the bill.

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