Walnut Street Transformation

When looking at the transformation of Walnut Street in approximately 50-year increments as depicted below, marked changes are evident from snapshot to snapshot.

Walnut Street, 1914: People are walking on the wide street and on the sidewalks. Awnings and signs indicate commerce while protecting people from the elements. A contiguous street wall is three-five stories tall, overhead wires. Tracks in the street suggest electric streetcars, and cars -- those funny little cars are few and far between. Walnut Street was dedicated to moving people.

Walnut Street, 1950’s: Cars, cars, and more cars -- all headed west on a one-way street with signs and storefronts as far as one can see. People are on the sidewalks and crosswalks. A contiguous street wall rises on each side of the street with a mixture of 3-story and ‘high rise’ buildings and the Kirkwood Hotel standing tall at 12-stories. Walnut Street was focused on moving cars.

Walnut Street, 2007: The street is narrower -- just wide enough for a bus passing in each direction and the sidewalk functions as a transit mall with shelters, benches, and signs telling cars not to enter. Skywalks cross over the street. The buildings are mostly tall, mixing some shiny new office towers and a residential tower with a few older buildings. The absence of people is striking. Walnut Street is dedicated to moving buses.

Over the course of a hundred years, the transformation of Walnut Street is striking. The focus progressively shifted away from people to the mechanisms that move people. The ironic result has been people gradually vanishing from Walnut Street. Walnut Street Transformation proposes that Walnut Street should once again focus on moving people and this street becomes a movement spine from the east to west end of downtown.

The proposal, Walnut Street Transformation, is literal -- make significant changes to the character of this east-west street, one of four streets that cross the Des Moines River and extends the length of downtown -- and symbolic in the way it provides a model for balanced thinking about downtown streets and a segway to a broader proposition for transit, thereby altering the way which we use downtown.
2. MOVEMENT
Walnut Street Transformation

*EXISTING CONDITION at Walnut Street*

**PROPOSED at Walnut Street**

**EXISTING CONDITION at Walnut Street**

**PHOTO COLLAGE: looking east**

**Walnut Street Studies**  
April 2, 2007

**typical section at Walnut Street**

photo collage, looking east at Walnut Street between 8th and 9th Streets
What is possible on Walnut Street?

Many positive changes are possible on Walnut Street. When considering its nearly 30-block length across downtown, from 16th Street near Meredith Corporation on the west to the Capitol grounds on the east, Walnut Street consists of an advantageous mix of uses and combination of established development and redevelopment opportunities.

As with nearly every other downtown street, the right-of-way dimension (the width between the property lines) is 66’. Within this established dimension, the Walnut Street Transformation proposal includes an number of aspects in order to create the envisioned movement spine through downtown:

- **Pedestrians**: Create a street where people are the first priority. Trees, landscaping, sidewalks, benches, awnings, lighting, and crosswalks are important elements to crafting this priority.

- **Cars and parking**: Remove the ‘buses only’ restriction between 3rd and 10th Streets to allow 2-way auto travel. In addition, on-street parking should be created. However, to accommodate a number of other aspects within Walnut Street’s limited width, parking should be restricted to one side of the street.

- **Transit**: Relocate the regional bus center to another location (as discussed in the “What needs to be done in order to transform Walnut Street” section of this report) to allow for a new downtown-only circulator -- a shuttle, tram or streetcar system that moves people among the various areas in downtown, running frequently and making numerous stops.

- **Bike lanes**: Identify Walnut Street as the east-west spine for downtown biking. Together with north-south spurs stemming from Walnut Street, a network of bike lanes that link into regional trails will be created (see Greening Downtown for further discussion). Street level activity is a part of this proposal and includes aspects beyond the public right-of-way such as:

- **Development**: Generate a market for retail and restaurant uses at the ground level. These uses could occupy portions of the sidewalk through outdoor seating, signage, and window displays.

- **Skywalk access**: Create clear, identifiable vertical connections between the skywalk and sidewalk levels at frequent intervals along Walnut Street (see Skywalks & Sidewalks for further discussion of this item).
Cities across the country have been investing heavily in transit. Systems range from light rail with a regional focus, such as Denver’s FasTracks, light rail in Minneapolis, and MAX in Portland, OR to smaller scale networks that intend to move people around denser downtown areas. Cities such as Little Rock, AK, Charlotte, NC, Portland, OR, Kenosha, WI, Tampa, FL, Memphis, TN, Seattle, WA, and Tacoma, WA have implemented two- to seven-mile streetcar systems that shuttle people around their densest, most urban areas. Their systems range from heritage streetcars that utilize or replicate historic trolleys (Little Rock, Charlotte, Kenosha, Tampa, Memphis, and Tacoma) to modern streetcars (Portland and Seattle). Many more cities are engaged in various stages of planning for their downtown transit systems including some Midwestern neighbors: Omaha, NE, Milwaukee, WI, Kansas City, MO, Columbus, OH, Cincinnati, OH, and Grand Rapids, MI.

In addition to providing transportation choices to their residents and easing mobility for visitors, many cities have found their investments in transit are spurring significant economic development activity in close proximity to transit lines. Portland, OR purports that their $55M investment in their 2.5-mile streetcar system has yielded an estimated $2.3-$2.8B in private development in areas served by transit since its 2001 implementation.

The transit component of the proposed Walnut Street Transformation would augment and integrate with existing and future regional transit such that people can move easily between each system.

While experiences from other cities across the country show that transit generates development, these systems are costly infrastructure investments and merit a phased approach that takes development potential into account. This proposal looks at incremental steps that can be taken to implement transit as downtown develops. The transit system proposed for Walnut Street will likely begin as a rubber-wheeled shuttle running along Walnut Street. It is envisioned that this initial Walnut Street line will transition to permanent infrastructure with rails or electrified lines.

**Walnut Street: the first generation of transit in downtown**

The downtown transit proposals in Walnut Street Transformation are part of a long history of transit in downtown Des Moines. In 1888, Des Moines became the second city in the nation to have electric rail service with the opening of lines running along Locust Street and Grand Avenue. The early 20th Century saw streetcar lines crisscrossing downtown and heading to nearby neighborhoods such as Highland Park, Ingersoll, Valley Junction, and Drake. Streetcars remained a viable system in Des Moines through mid-century. It was ultimately overwhelmed by high levels of auto ownership, a new freeway system, inexpensive fuel, and suburban development. Streetcars were gradually replaced by a bus system, now operated by DART (Des Moines Area Regional Transit).
The map below show the initial Walnut Street transit line running east-west across downtown between the Capitol Grounds and 15th Street. Selection of Walnut Street balances development momentum between north and south; Walnut Street is one block north of activity on Court Avenue and one block south of the heart of the East Village on Locust Street. It avoids the heavy traffic on Locust Street and Grand Avenue which serves as the one-way pair spanning downtown. A Walnut Street transit line creates a simple, clear, back and forth movement proven to be conducive to higher levels of transit ridership. Meanwhile, infrastructure improvements necessary for implementing the transit system will focus investment towards transforming the tired, dated character present on Walnut Street today.

Stops are identified on the Walnut Street line. They are intentionally spaced close together -- 5 blocks maximum - such that a walk from any stop would get you to intended destinations within 2-3 blocks. The stops utilize existing nodes as a way to bolster activity and development. They include: 15th Street/Meredith, 10th Street, 7th Street, Nollen Plaza/Civic Center, Riverfront/E. 2nd Avenue, East Village/E. 6th Street, and the State Capitol. Additionally, these stops relate to future north-south lines and their associated amenities and development opportunities.

The 2nd/3rd Street line is a logical first expansion of the system, stopping at existing downtown amenities and fostering development in the areas surrounding these places. Stops would include: Mercy Hospital, the Iowa Events Center, Nollen Plaza/Civic Center, Court Avenue, Science Center of Iowa, and Principal Park. The route would likely form a loop along the one-way pair formed by 2nd Avenue and 3rd Street.

The 15th Street line would connect residential neighborhoods with downtown amenities and commercial areas. Stops would include Oakridge/Sherman Hill, Methodist Hospital, Gateway Park, Meredith, and Gray’s Landing. This line should direct development in the Gray’s Landing and Oakridge neighborhoods. This line has the potential to extend a mile northwest and connect to Drake University.

The E. 6th Street line would connect residential areas with downtown amenities and commercial areas, linking future neighborhoods at the Lower East Village and Northeast Riverfront with the East Village and Walnut Street line. Additionally, this line would serve the Brenton Skating Plaza and the future adventure recreation area along the Des Moines River on the southeast side of downtown.

The timing of the 15th and East 6th Street lines will depend upon development momentum in the areas they reach. The northern and southern extents of the three north-south lines should consider the planning for future regional rapid transit. DART is currently analyzing route alternatives that extend to suburban communities surrounding Des Moines. As these routes are identified, downtown transit could be a crucial link between the regional system and downtown. The downtown system will be most effective if it connects to the regional transit network.

These recommendations are offered from a broad planning perspective. Specialized transportation planning necessary to implement downtown transit could modify these recommendations, but the basis for further planning should adhere to underlying goals of enhancing and increasing transit use and connecting existing and proposed downtown amenities, commercial centers, and neighborhoods. The configuration of the lines is intended to bolster existing development and spur new development. The proposed transit system resists temptations to ‘touch’ everything in downtown, rather, it offers centrally-located routes that access many downtown districts with clarity and efficiency to a city that is not presently accustomed to wide-spread transit use.
What needs to be done in order to transform Walnut Street?

All metropolitan bus lines converge in downtown. With its dedicated transit mall use for a 7-block stretch, Walnut Street is the hub of regional transit for the Des Moines Area Regional Transit system (DART). For approximately 60% of those disembarking at the Walnut Street Transit Mall, downtown is their final destination; 40% of riders use the transit mall to transfer to a different bus line. Both need a comfortable, convenient place to wait for their respective buses. To transform Walnut Street, the bus queuing that consumes both travel lanes for up to 10 minutes at a time and the heavy bus traffic that dominates the street needs to be eliminated in favor of a new downtown transit center.

History and precedents from other cities show that transit centers can be vibrant, attractive places in the heart of the city. They can include mixed use development ranging from parking structures to retail, housing, commercial, and cultural. Historical examples of transit stations and depots include exemplary urban architecture; contemporary examples across the country have embraced a similar attitude of creating outstanding architecture and public spaces in the heart of their respective cities.

In Des Moines, the future transit center should have equally high ambitions as it aims to retain existing bus ridership and foster greater transit use. Research by DART shows existing riders like the central location that the transit mall offers. In order to foster transit use, sites best suited for the transit center would provide little disruption to current ridership patterns, offer skywalk access and provide easy transfers to downtown transit. Viable sites need to be at least 1-acre and probably closer to 2-acres. The adjacent map identifies potential sites for a transit center:

TC1: This site along Cherry Street between 6th and 7th Streets was identified in a 2003 study by DART. The site is mostly vacant and is adjacent to the downtown core. However it does not link to downtown transit on Walnut Street nor presently have skywalk access. Future skywalk access is plausible, but difficult to attain.

TC2, TC3, TC4: These sites are all located along Walnut Street and therefore offer the opportunity for interfacing with downtown transit, as well as providing various levels of continuity with the existing transit system.

TC2 and TC3 provide access to the skywalk system. TC2 is presently occupied by a municipal parking structure on 5th and Walnut Streets that is facing significant maintenance needs. TC3 is a private surface parking lot located between 12th and 13th Streets along Walnut Street.

TC4 is a full block between East 2nd and East 3rd Streets and between E. Locust and E. Walnut Streets that was recently vacated by a car dealership. The site is presently being considered for redevelopment that could include the transit center program needs.

Providing transit centers at both ends of the Walnut Street downtown transit line is an alternative strategy for locating this facility in downtown Des Moines. These locations could provide parking as well as a location for transferring between regional buses and/or transferring between regional bus and downtown transit. Due to high land values in urban cores and the relatively large site needs of transit facilities, this is a strategy that many cities have employed. This strategy is also viable for Des Moines and would address long-term transit needs, but it would be a significant change to the way that existing riders use transit to reach downtown.
A transit center provides an environment for customers to transfer between buses, between buses and other modes of transportation, or between other modes of transportation. A transit center can be a very simple or complex building. A simple transit center can be an off-street area large enough to accommodate buses with benches and passenger amenities. More complex transit centers can have heated waiting areas, vending areas, ticket sales and transit staff available. When combined with other urban development, transit centers can become a full-scale mixed-use complex, including office, retail, and residential uses, as well as include structured parking. Below are some of the features that can be included in a Transit Center:

- Arrival and departure areas
- Connections to downtown transit
- Skywalk connections
- Intercity bus connections
- Taxi Cab connections
- Bus Rapid Transit/Rail connections
- Information/Maps
- Transit Pass sales areas
- Walkways and landscaping
- Parking (service vehicles and/or public)
- Concession space, vending machines and ATM’s
- Public restrooms and phones
- Public meeting rooms
- Mixed use development: office, retail, and/or residential

Benefits of a Transit Center for downtown Des Moines:

- Removes buses dwelling on Walnut Street and allows other uses on Walnut Street
- Maintains passenger access to downtown and other key destinations, but removes queuing buses from the public right-of-way.
- Eligible for federal funding
- Can be integrated with other public structures such as parking, thus reducing costs of development.
- Provides higher-quality transit experience for patrons by having a safe and secure boarding area for buses.
- Provides opportunities to police transit boarding areas, thereby improving the image of transit.
the Midwestern Automobile Addiction

Our commutes have typically been short. With inexpensive fuel and easy parking, why wouldn’t we drive to work each day? And, besides how else would we get there? Why wouldn’t we drive around the corner to run errands? Factors are changing. We’ve been warned to reduce our reliance on our roadways or else our treasured 16-minute commute that offers our community such a competitive advantage will inch upwards. Gas prices have risen precipitously. Additionally, we now understand a real concern for the environment that is threatened, in part, by our pervasive automobile use.

Downtown transit creates an opportunity to rethink parking strategies in downtown.

Downtown has approximately 50,000 parking spaces, including structured parking, surface parking lots, and on-street parking. At about 300 acres (or ~260 football fields), this is a considerable amount of real estate consumed by parking, space that does not contribute as highly as most other uses to the tax rolls nor to the vibrancy of downtown. As presently conceived, each downtown worker is assumed to need a parking space and every new office building needs approximately an equal area devoted to parking.

As envisioned, downtown transit would run frequently and provide easy, comfortable access between many areas of downtown. Through the increased mobility that downtown transit would offer, it could ease the burden of the perceived need to park immediately adjacent to the places people live, work, and play. Imagine coming downtown for the Arts Festival and parking at the edge of downtown, then being dropped off by the downtown shuttle or a streetcar at the Festival grounds. After attending the Festival, taking the shuttle to a downtown eatery or back to your car, conveniently parked away from congested streets. Such Park Once programs are becoming popular in many cities and are enabled by transit. Or, imagine if workers at downtown’s large corporations could count on reliable transit to take them to and from home or to their car parked on the edge of downtown. Both scenarios begin to lessen us from auto addiction and offer the opportunity to more-wholly experience what our urban environment has to offer. Changing our attitude towards downtown parking would free many acres of land for more active, higher value development and still address the very real parking needs in downtown.