Expand Transit and Realize TOD Potential

Downtown Dallas is certainly a hub of transportation. **As the center of the city and one of the region's most prominent employment centers, it is the place where freeways, arterial roads, commuter rail, light rail, bus lines and trolley cars all converge**. However, despite this range of transportation, most of the emphasis is on the automobile and there is a lack of connectivity between these different modes of travel. Downtown Dallas must expand its transit and realize the full potential of Transit-Oriented Development (TOD). If it does not, it risks being left behind in the competitive global marketplace of urban centers.

Downtown came of age at a time when streetcars and interurban rail lines connected to areas near and far from the thriving core. Like many North American regions, this "transit-oriented" growth was quickly replaced by an extensive network of expressways and Interstate highways, which helped vault Dallas into the top tier of world urban economies within a few decades. Then, beginning in the 1980s the Dallas region successfully developed a burgeoning commuter- and light rail network that now reconnects Downtown to regional centers such as Fort Worth, Plano and Garland by mode other than the car. The recent emphasis on diversifying the region's mobility system has set the foundation for a transition to a comprehensive multi-modal network.

DART light rail, buses, and streetcars widen Downtown's accessibility to a more diverse range of workers, visitors and residents.

GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS

While the existing multi-modal transportation system has laid the groundwork for an eventual shift away from a predominantly automobile-oriented circulation network, Downtown's success in the 21st century will rest on whether it can compete with urban environments throughout the world. Contemporary global cities such as Shanghai, Los Angeles and Dubai continue to undergo rapid shifts to accommodate millions of new residents. Like Dallas – and perhaps unlike 19th and 20th century capitals such as New York, London or Paris – these emerging mega-cities are ensuring competitiveness through their transportation systems that balance the attraction of auto-mobility with a robust transit network. Dallas's competitiveness will rest on its ability to continue to provide for automobile access while broadening the appeal of the center city to residents and workers who are familiar with and demand a world-class transit system.

STRATEGIES FOR TAKING ADVANTAGE OF TRANSIT

In particular, this Transformative Strategy presents two key strategies to ensure that Downtown Dallas takes full advantage of the unique opportunities that transit can provide to the urban environment. The first addresses completing the transit network, understanding that additional transit expansion will help ensure the competitiveness of Downtown Dallas as a prime destination for business, recreation and living. The second involves realizing the full potential of transit-oriented development through specific incentives and regulatory mechanisms.

COMPLETE TRANSIT NETWORK

Downtown Dallas's vision of a more pedestrian-oriented, vibrant urban core rests in part on its ability to remain competitive while attracting the best and brightest future workers. Dallas must, therefore, ensure that expansion of the transit network is a priority. A robust, balanced transportation system will only be possible if there is full commitment to completing the transit system and ensuring that it is coordinated, easy to use, accessible to a variety of modes, and allows for future flexibility.

Transit: Today and Tomorrow

For a center city the size of Downtown Dallas, the transportation system is fairly well developed. The automobile network, including the freeways and many boulevards, maintains nearly unparalleled visibility and access to every part of the region. Downtown is also the focal point of the city's bus system, anchored by two major transfer points on the east and west ends of the loop.

The Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) light rail network is also strong. As proposed in the 1980s, the system, currently encompassing the Blue, Red and Green lines, is envisioned to continue expanding to strategic regional destinations including Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport (DFW). Within Downtown, current and anticipated rail bottlenecks at either end of the Pacific Transit Mall continue to drive the need for a second alignment, commonly referred to as "D2." Due to the heavy transit traffic in place in the northern parts of Downtown along the transit mall, D2 is seen as an opportunity to expand light rail capacity and connect major destinations in the southern half of the loop. A study prepared in 2008 examined 17 possible alignments for such a line. An examination of engineering feasibility, cost and development potential led a committee to select four preferred alternatives, most of which include a significant underground portion due to geologic, mobility and infrastructure concerns.

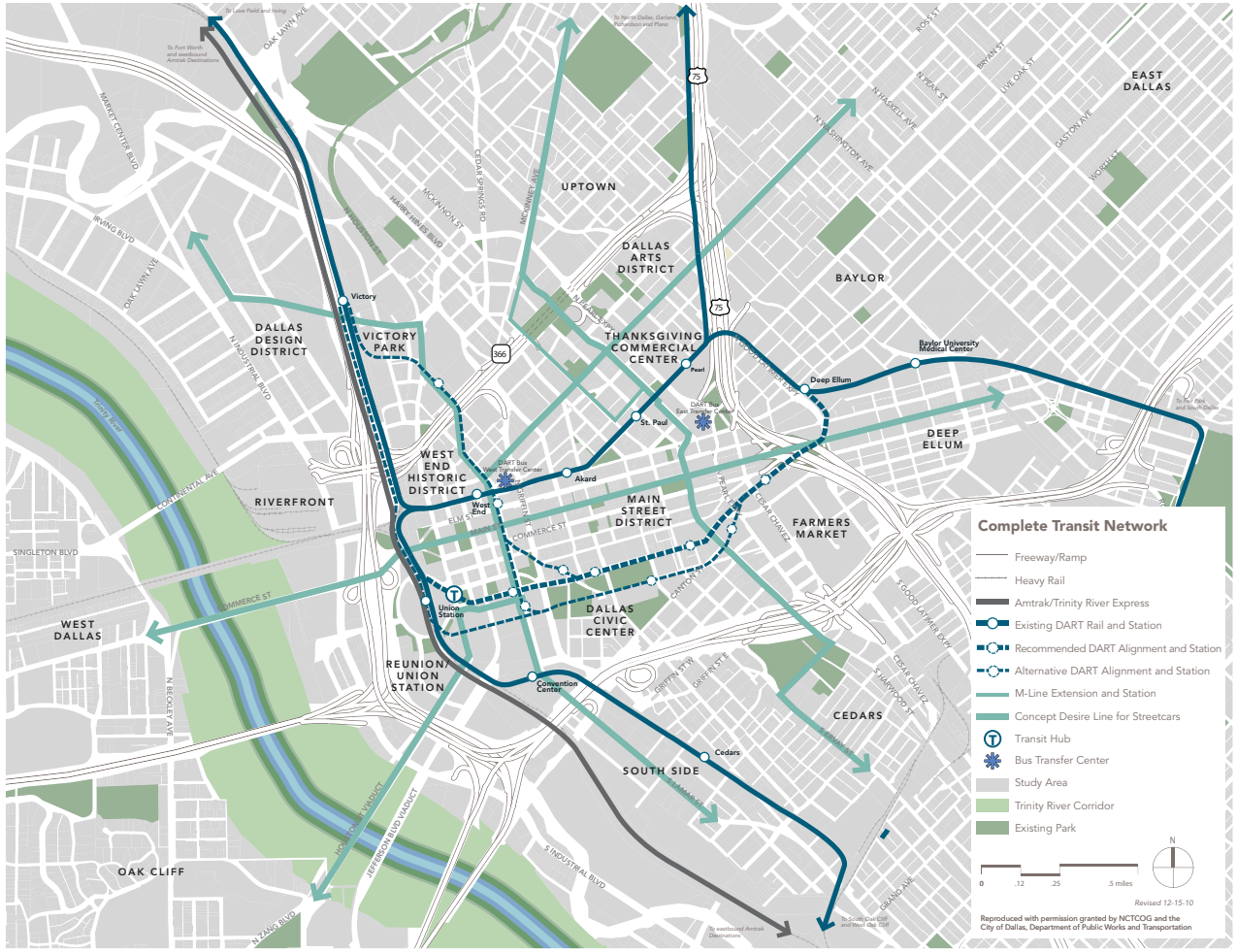
A new southern alignment alternative was added in 2009 to serve the new Omni Convention Center Hotel, currently under construction just north of the Dallas Convention Center. A decision on a specific alignment, however, is likely years away due to budget constraints, political and economic interests, and ongoing planning considerations in part driven by Downtown Dallas 360.

The existing McKinney Avenue (M-Line) Trolley, a restored historic streetcar service through parts of Uptown, currently terminates just north of Ross Avenue near the Dallas Museum of Art.

Funding has been secured to extend the M-Line further into the CBD to provide better connections to DART light rail, specifically at the Pearl Station near the Arts District and extending toward Main Street to Federal, a short walk from the St. Paul Station.

Another significant component of the rapidly-emerging rail network in Downtown Dallas is a modern streetcar system. Originally envisioned to connect major landmarks and destinations such as the Convention Center, West End and Main Street, streetcars are now being examined for their potential to knit together Downtown districts and their surrounding neighborhoods. As an early commitment to the nascent streetcar system, the City and other partners have been successful in securing grant funding for a "starter line" that would connect Downtown (specifically the Union Station area) with adjacent Oak Cliff across the Trinity River. This line will become a key feature in a Streetcar System Study and subsequent planning efforts that will examine the opportunities for modern streetcars to connect in-town neighborhoods to Downtown and each other, extend the reach of light rail transit, supplement or replace bus lines, and stimulate economic development.

These existing transit lines, planned improvements, and ongoing studies demonstrate an unwavering commitment to expanding mobility options for the urban core of Dallas. To support these efforts, the 360 plan puts forth recommendations to comprehensively guide transit investment in the coming decades. The plan's proposed "Complete Transit System", presented in the figure at right, comprises existing and planned light rail and streetcar lines, emphasizing ultimate versatility to ensure long-term flexibility. Components of the Complete Transit System are multiple modes; route flexibility; and coverage and access.



As DART light rail service expands, its role in supporting Downtown development will increase as additional regional destinations are brought within reach.

Modern streetcars such as those found in Portland, Oregon will serve as a vital component of a multi-modal transit network thoroughout Downtown and in-town neighborhoods.

Multiple Modes

Downtown must embrace all of the different ways to get around. Building on the existing and planned rail system, Downtown's future transit network will incorporate a fully-developed combination of light rail (and/or subway where necessary), streetcar and trolley, inter-city rail and buses.

1. Light Rail

Light rail should be the backbone of the regional rail system. DART has already established a successful alternative to private automobiles for longer trips. Investments in DART will be critical to expand capacity, ensure efficiency, and maintain and attract riders. The most critical investment for Downtown Dallas will be the D2 alignment decision. Any of the available alignments would solve the bottleneck problem and greatly expand transit capacity by enveloping the city center with enviable access to light rail and its potential destinations. The D2 alignment, however, should be seen as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reshape the physical landscape of the southern portion of Downtown. With a connection to DFW and Love Field in the future, D2 has a unique opportunity to link the region's primary airports with Union Station, the region's only multi-modal transportation center. With its existing stations for the Red and Blue lines and the Trinity Railway Express, Union Station is perfectly poised to accommodate additional rail transfers and destination trips.

The 360 plan, therefore, recommends a "new" D2 alignment that is effectively a combination of the currently proposed route that would access the Omni Hotel and one that would link to Union Station. Connecting to the northwestern-bound DART lines between Victory Park and the Woodall Rodgers Freeway below grade, this "new" D2 alternative would stop underground near Union Station while providing a direct connection to the transit facility. Then it would emerge near Market to follow Young eastward at grade (see Complete Transit Network figure on page 42). A stop at Union Station would boost the station's role as a multi-modal hub, opening up an entire quadrant of the center city to new regionally-significant development. Other considerations for D2 are its ability to dramatically improve the urban environment in the Civic Center through infrastructure and accessibility enhancements along Young Street. Finally, its potential to spur development in the Farmers Market area with an at-grade station will further transform another portion of southern Downtown.

2. Streetcars

An effective transit circulator system is crucial to successfully knitting together Downtown districts and surrounding in-town neighborhoods. In the absence of such a system, Downtown runs the risk of remaining a collection of isolated islands of activity disconnected from each other and from the nurturing support of the surrounding neighborhoods that are essential to its continued growth. A modern streetcar network can be the glue that binds Downtown's established destinations together and the framework along which new development can rebuild the fabric of the central city. Building on the successful model of the M-Line Trolley in Uptown, a network of modern streetcars will create a legitimate, reliable and attractive method of transportation to various focal points within and outside the Loop. While modern streetcars such as those in use in Portland, Oregon are in some ways a replication of older technology (like the M-Line), they have a unique ability to reduce the dominance of the automobile for shorter trips through the central city, radically transforming Dallasites' expectations of how to travel into and through Downtown. While a complete network of streetcars will likely take many years to come to fruition, investment in alignments should be based on the following points:

- Develop the streetcar network in a radial pattern from points within the loop based on proposed "Desire Lines" (see Complete Transit Network figure on page 42) to augment and connect to light rail lines and stations, increasing ridership potential;
- Target development potential along corridors with ample vacant land, surface parking or recent or proposed development activity; and
- Link key destinations such as Union Station, West End, Main Street, Farmers Market and the Arts District to surrounding in-town neighborhoods.

3. Inter-City Rail

With Union Station serving as the regional multi-modal hub, rail connections to other cities are a particular benefit to Downtown. Existing Amtrak and Trinity River Express service help boost the center city's regional competitiveness. The City of Dallas should pursue a stop of the future high-speed rail network that will connect the Texas Triangle Megaregion at Union Station. Such inter-city links will further enhance Downtown Dallas's ability to compete for jobs, investment and resources in the future.

4. Buses

Buses should be used to augment the rail system and provide direct access to areas underserved by rail. Some bus routes should be removed with the completion of the light rail and streetcar network, particularly along Main Street. As the complete transit network is developed, bus transit should be examined to determine its most effective role. For example, a streamlined system of buses to serve longer-distance destinations not located near a rail station may still be an effective part of the multi-modal system, providing cost-savings and increased flexibility for changing demographic or event-related needs.

Serious consideration should also be given to the possibility of using rubber tire trolley circulators as a more affordable precursor or place holder for streetcars in the short-term. With appropriate branding and visibility such a trolley system could serve effectively as an interim measure to tie existing destinations together, although lacking the promise of streetcar to attract new development. This would enable the transportation benefits of a complete circulator network to be enjoyed even before a complete and significantly more expensive streetcar system could be realized.

Route Flexibility

Downtown transit must be nimble. A hallmark of the Complete Transit Network is the flexibility of routes to provide multiple options to serve commuters, visitors and event-goers. While many rail systems are initially developed for simple linear return service (i.e. their destinations are two endpoints), a mature rail system in a dynamic urban region should allow for trains to have multiple options for destinations. In particular, streetcar lines should be constructed to allow for easy transitions from track to track to facilitate seamless connectivity. For example, the streetcar line that originates in Oak Cliff might initially be constructed to end on Houston Street near Union Station. Future construction should ultimately create the ability for that same streetcar to alternatively be destined for Deep Ellum (travelling first over the Jefferson Viaduct, north along Lamar, and then east on Main Street) or the Arts District (travelling north along Lamar and then east along Ross). Similar flexibility should be built-in to the extent feasible to allow for such connections along all of the streetcar lines so that route flexibility can grow with the system and as demand dictates (such as for a special event). Similarly, light rail lines, with the addition of a D2 alignment, should be designed to "spread out" the capacity and routing, allowing for demand-based transit planning.

DART bus service will need to be evaluated for maximum efficiency as new rail transit lines go into service.

Union Station will continue to serve as the primary point of entry into Downtown for inter-city lines such as Amtrak, the Trinity River Express, and future high-speed rail.

Rail transit corridors should be prioritized for public realm improvements.

Streetcar and light rail corridors offer opportunities to integrate enhanced public spaces into the transit network, allowing for easier transfer and access to developments.

Coverage and Access

Downtown must be saturated with transit. The Complete Transit Network strategy hinges on the concept of universal coverage and access throughout the whole of the urban core. This strategy of "blanketing" transit throughout the loop should follow three primary goals, discussed below.

1. "Two Blocks to Transit"

Downtown Dallas has the opportunity to provide rail transit access within approximately two blocks of any point within the loop. The current light rail and M-Line routes are anchored and oriented largely in the northern half of the loop. As is planned in part through the D2 alignment proposal, a complete network should address all corners of the center city to provide fixed transit access to all major destinations. A D2 alignment along Young would provide the most visible impact to this southern area, more completely integrating rail transit into the urban fabric of areas like the Civic Center and Farmers Market. This southerly alignment would guarantee nearly universal coverage of light rail throughout the loop, with nearly every property within ¼ mile of a light rail station – an enviable position for any urban center. Building on the wide and broad light rail coverage, the proposed streetcar Desire Lines are placed to provide different but complementary transit service throughout the loop and the surrounding in-town neighborhoods. Together, these rail modes will create a comprehensive network that will be accessible within two blocks of nearly any property inside the loop.

2. Avoid Redundancy

By spreading out rail transit to serve different users and in building in route flexibility, a complete rail network will avoid redundancy. In addition to tremendous cost savings by using streetcar or light rail along a particular corridor, but typically not both, potential passengers will benefit from a more complete system with additional transfer opportunities. By ensuring accessible, nearby alternative routes through Downtown, service can be maintained if a particular track encounters a disruption.

3. Transfer Points

To gain maximum efficiency, transfers must be seamless and coordinated. Convenient transfers from light rail stations to the streetcar network can effectively extend the reach of the regional transit system by providing the crucial "last mile" connection to the ultimate destination. Fare structures and collection, operational frequency, and physical connectivity are essential to successfully attract riders and "convert" automobile drivers into transit riders. Furthermore, key transfer locations at critical junctions will help concentrate transit ridership and boost surrounding development potential. As the transit system matures and becomes more complex, the desirability of having a transit station hub that provides access to most, if not all, destinations will become increasingly important in order to ensure legibility and convenience in the transit system.

REALIZING TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT: FIXED-RAIL IMPROVEMENT ZONE

With an ambitious transit plan, Downtown Dallas is positioning itself as a national leader in heralding a real shift in how people get to and move around the center city. But the path is not an easy one. Public investment in light rail and streetcar lines is anticipated to cost hundreds of millions of dollars and construction will take many years. Proposals in Dallas will also continue to compete for Federal funding with rail projects throughout the United States.

Commensurate with public transit investment, private development in the form of transit-oriented development (TOD) is critical. Federal sources of funding now mandate that public dollars must be leveraged by significant new mixed-use housing, office and retail developments that synergize with the new transit service and stimulate ridership. To date, Dallas has had some success with realizing private-sector investment adjacent to rail transit. Mockingbird Station is perhaps the city's most famous example, but its location within suburban style surroundings and its direct freeway access provided some distinct advantages that enabled it to be built without any public incentives. Within the CBD, however, it is more difficult to distinguish development potential based on transit proximity, since nearly every parcel has or is planned to have access to rail transit within two blocks in the future.

To help distinguish the benefits of transit adjacency, TOD in Downtown Dallas needs to be further incentivized to ensure the greatest impact. To support the Complete Transit Network, private and public investment will need to be coordinated to increase Dallas's competitive edge in securing funding and to provide the greatest visual, economic and environmental impacts throughout Downtown.

Public Improvement Assessment Area

Typically, as transit lines are constructed, complementary improvements to the public realm (including sidewalks, crosswalks, travel lanes, and on-street parking areas) are included in the funding and design plans to enhance the physical environment near stations. However, such improvements are rarely consistent and often do not address specific, localized objectives. To ensure that the investment in new transit is adequately leveraged and supported, a Public Improvement Assessment Area is recommended to support an enhanced level of public realm improvements along streetcar corridors. The assessment would apply an added increment on the existing Downtown assessment district to properties that front onto a streetcar line or are located within 300 feet of a station or boarding area. The assessment could be applied to existing or future light rail lines at a later date if preferred. While the political feasibility or financial impact of the assessment area increment has not been fully determined, it is envisioned that an modest increment may be realistic to help augment funds to construct, operate and maintain the public improvements along streetcar lines.

Using funds from the Public Improvement Assessment Area to augment public investment, the street right-of-way would be greatly enhanced beyond improvements normally funded with public transit projects. Improvements would focus on promoting a pedestrian, bicycle and transit friendly environment and could include such amenities as:

- Widened sidewalks
- District-specific street furniture, signage and streetscape that reflects the desired character of the area
- Intersection bulbouts and enhanced crosswalks
- Enhanced lighting

Improvement Incentive Zone

To demonstrate a direct link between public investment and economic development and physical redevelopment, properties located within 300 feet from the station location would be subject to design standards to ensure pedestrian-oriented and transit-friendly design, especially at street level. Design standards would be developed and enforced based on recommendations provided later in this chapter. These properties would also benefit from incentives such as:

- Reduced parking requirements, particularly for new residential construction
- Streamlined permit approval for sidewalk dining and waiving of ROW license fees
- Public Improvement Assessment Area increment waiver for five years
- Prioritized business assistance/recruitment funds (in TIF districts, where applicable)
- Prioritized development funding assistance (in TIF districts, where applicable)
- Prioritized public infrastructure investments such as street and streetscape improvements

Together, a combination of Public Improvement Assessment Area funding and enhanced development standards will provide a better link between transit investment and economic development, ensuring that the potential for transit-oriented development is realized.