

Downtown Transportation Overview

A successful downtown provides dynamic synergy between people and activities. A mix of great streets and comfortable connections makes this synergy possible. The choices available to move about and the quality of those choices influence people's perceptions of downtown and their willingness to engage in life there. The following sections document existing conditions of the downtown Wichita transportation network, identifying the challenges and opportunities for creating the connections that will frame and fully enable realization of the Downtown Revitalization Plan.

Downtown Wichita once relied on a variety of transportation modes for its bustling economy. Like this image of Douglas Avenue in the 1920s, the streetcar and private automobiles mix comfortably with pedestrians and other street life. As travelers began to rely more on their cars and downtown activities shifted and reformed the landscape, Wichita's multimodal transportation system was introduced to new challenges. They include:

- super-blocks interrupting connections of the original street grid for all users;
- dispersed destinations, gaps between buildings, and poor streetscape conditions that discourage walking; and,
- a mix of one-way and two-way streets, perceived as confusing for drivers unfamiliar with downtown and its neighborhoods.



A new vision for downtown renews the potential to, once again, intertwine the transportation system and reintroduce the essential characteristics of a complete range of choices for downtown access and circulation. It can build on the significant investment of previous generations, particularly in areas of long-standing destinations and recent development. Each characteristic of circulation, from safety and freedom-of-movement to wayfinding and aesthetics, can help to brand downtown Wichita as a welcoming place for business, an attractive place to live, and an interesting place to spend an afternoon or an evening of culture and entertainment. The following summarizes the major findings detailed in this report.

TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM ELEMENTS

Street Configuration

- Downtown Wichita has been well-defined by its major transportation “infrastructure”: the Arkansas River running north-south to the west, the railway and I-135 to the east, and US 54 to the south. These significant barriers also help to organize the street system so that their few crossing points focus the majority of traffic to only a handful of streets. The strong network of gridded streets creates redundancy to these links enhancing movement within downtown and is an asset worth preserving and re-establishing in some areas.
- Getting around downtown by car can be an intimidating experience for visitors, newcomers and long-time Wichitans alike. The barriers of rivers and railroads and freeways, combined with the mix of one-way and two-way streets (some continuous and others not), make for a confusing and even frustrating system of streets. Simplifying and reconnecting the *street network* provides for easy access to downtown and easy orientation for even first-time visitors. It will also be critical to more intuitive, discernable transit routing and transfers.
- Street network issues include: the mix of one-way and two-way streets, some of which change how they operate within the downtown; loss of connectivity through the creation of superblocks and placement of buildings in the public street right-of-way; and, a lack of appropriately timed signals on some streets. Each of these creates out-of-direction travel and unnecessary delay for motorists trying to efficiently get where they want to be.
- Traffic flows freely in downtown Wichita, even during peak commute times. The wide streets that makeup the downtown street network could better integrate other priority users by reallocation of some lanes to transit, bicycling and parking, thereby strengthening downtown for all users.

Pedestrian Environment

- The street grid is a major asset to pedestrian and bicyclists. For pedestrians it provides generally good connectivity between uses, and numerous crossing opportunities at urban-scaled intersections. The long north-south blocks coupled with dispersed destinations are less than ideal for travelling on foot around downtown. Further, the introduction of superblocks has diminished the pedestrian experience in the areas around the Arkansas River.
- Public art has been introduced on many city streets. Coupled with a shaded sidewalk and other landscaping, public art contributes to perceptions of ownership and care for public streets and a general feeling of security for pedestrian travel. As in Old Town and along Douglas Avenue through Delano, the preservation and enhancement of sidewalk amenities and pedestrian-scale streets create unique pedestrian experiences and should be encouraged. Aesthetic designs and materials will be detailed in the city’s street design manual, but should be functional and reflect the most up-to-date approaches to ADA and maintenance considerations.

Bicycle Network

- The City's bicycle planning has focused largely on a recreational path system. Recent routes for on-street bicycling are geared to commute travel, in and out of Downtown. Opportunities exist to enhance circulation and parking for bicycling downtown and for connections from the street system to the existing and future recreational bike paths. Streets that invite bicycling as a priority mode would generally run parallel to transit and auto priority streets through downtown.
- All vehicles in Wichita Transit's fleet have been equipped with bicycle racks helping to bridge distances between bus stops and destinations for some riders. Once arrived downtown, the transit-rider may find that access to one's destination is most efficient by bicycle rather than by another bus transfer.

Transit System

- Most existing bus service runs only hourly during the mid-day and 30 minutes during peak hours, connecting at the Downtown Transit Center to facilitate transfers. The routes travel to the Downtown Transit Center using many streets, with little concentration of transit activity.
- The visibility of transit service, or presence on the street, is very limited. There are a few benches that denote transit stops, but no bus stop signs or other on-street information.
- The Q-Line is operating on a one-way, 30-minute loop in downtown. During heavy travel times, such as Friday and Saturday evenings, a second bus operates a reverse loop. The Q-Line also serves as a parking shuttle for major events at the newly opened Intrust Arena. Recognition of, and support for, the Q-Line is strong among the Wichita residents.
- Wichita Transit is in the processing of creating a Transit Development Plan that would look at fundamentally altering the existing hub-and-spoke transit system, to address growth that has occurred in Wichita over the past 15-20 years. The transit plan would incorporate and support the elements of the downtown plan, ensuring strong regional transit connections as well as movement within the downtown area. Concentrating transit on fewer streets with fixed stops and clear connections to Q-Line service will be important elements of the transit component of the downtown plan.
- Wichita Transit has invested in Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) equipment and has the ability to improve customer communications making transit more available to new riders. Communication giving signal priority to transit vehicles is also possible with the cooperation and modest investment by the City.

Intermodal Connections

- The existing intercity bus service terminal is currently several blocks away and not visible from the Downtown Transit Center, making the connection between local and interregional travel less than ideal. The intercity bus providers have expressed interest in relocating into the downtown Transit Center.

- Current Amtrak service is available 25 miles to the north of downtown Wichita. Historic Union Station and its parking and rail infrastructure are located near the Downtown Transit Center. This major city asset is now privately owned. The Northern Flyer Alliance has been leading advocacy efforts to return Amtrak service to downtown. A series of studies and recent legislative action indicate that preserving the use of this landmark infrastructure will be an important outcome of plan implementation.