

Wichita Douglas Avenue Approach

VALUES AND PRIORITIES

Designing a great street requires addressing trade-offs: How should we best allocate limited right-of-way, limited capital budgets, and limited operating budgets? Addressing trade-offs requires clarity about Wichita's values and priorities.

Throughout the planning process, Wichitans have been clear and nearly unanimous about their values and goals for the project. Residents' and business owners' highest level goals include:

- Foster economic development. There is a strong desire for additional development in the Douglas Ave corridor, along with attracting more customers for existing businesses.
- Attract and retain young talent. There is a concern that Wichita is losing its most talented young people to larger cities in other states, and an ambition to reverse that migration by offering the amenities that young people seek, along with more affordable and family-friendly housing options.
- Attract families and older adults downtown. Wichita prides itself on family friendliness, but the downtown is uncomfortable for many people. It should be the heart of the city for everyone.
- Be a good steward of limited public resources. Wichita has limited public funding, and prides itself in frugal investments that have a high rate of return. We should make sure that spending on Douglas Ave creates more value than it costs.
- Make walking and biking downtown safe and comfortable for people of all ages and abilities. Walkability is not only enjoyable, it is also the foundation of economic success in any downtown.

In addition, we heard other second-level priorities, including:

- Make it easier to find a parking space downtown. Parking availability is partly about the supply of parking spaces, but more about how parking is managed. It may be cheaper to help motorists find the corridor's abundant existing empty spaces than it is to build new parking.
- Maintain truck and emergency vehicle access. There are many industrial users in the corridors, and most businesses take deliveries from the front. Make sure freight access is unimpeded.
- Minimize congestion. While traffic volumes are low on Douglas, many Wichitans value being able to drive as fast as they like, without other cars in front of them.

OPPORTUNITIES

In Wichita, there is only one street like Douglas Avenue. It has the greatest concentration of walkable retail in the city. It connects almost all of the nodes of increasing economic activity, including Delano, Downtown, Old Town, and the Design District. It has many of the city's best buildings, best restaurants and bars, and best cultural amenities.

That said, it also lacks cohesion. The street is so wide that some people are uncomfortable parking on one side of the street to visit a business on the other. In between the nodes of activity, there are blocks of vacant storefronts, vacant lots, or otherwise dead zones. It was also designed like a main highway when the city's population and employment was twice what it is today, and before Kellogg Ave was turned into a freeway. As a result, current traffic volumes are less than a third of the street's capacity.

The excess capacity creates a remarkable opportunity for Wichita: Can we reallocate that space in a way that better supports the values and priorities above? The answer is clearly yes. While many other cities are reallocating street space in a way that results in significant congestion or traffic diversion, Wichita is in an enviable position. It can create a world class main street without inconveniencing motorists or eliminating parking.

DECISION POINTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To decide how to design Douglas Ave to support Wichitans' goals, we must make a series of decisions. These include:

Five Lanes or Three?

This first decision is the most important. Are we ready to transition Douglas from being a highway to being a downtown main street? There are advantages and disadvantages to both choices:

	Five Lanes	Three Lanes
Advantages	Motorists can drive as fast as they like	Significant improvement in safety for all users Significant improvement in walkability Significant improvement in retail success Opportunity to reallocate space for other functions
Disadvantages	Economic performance same as the past Poor safety performance Poor walkability and bikeability	The most prudent drivers dictates maximum speed, frustrating some motorists who want to drive faster Some people dislike change
Recommendation	If the city chooses this option, we recommend that no other major improvements be completed, due to poor return on investment.	Our strong recommendation. There are no congestion impacts, and major upsides.

What to Do with the Extra Space?

Converting the street from five to three lanes frees up at least 22 feet, and in many blocks, significantly more space. How should this space be used? One option is to put diagonal parking on both sides of the entire street, but many Wichitans have been concerned about the real and perceived safety concerns of backing up into traffic. Another option is using that space for outdoor seating, but there are not enough restaurants and cafes to utilize that much space. A third is modern protected lanes for people on bikes, scooters, and other human-scaled devices.

	Protected Bike/Scooter Lane	More Diagonal Parking	Plazas
Advantages	<p>Very effective tool for attracting and retaining young talent</p> <p>Effective tool for attracting families</p> <p>Effective tool for improving walkability and pedestrian safety</p>	<p>Increase in number of parking spaces</p>	<p>Opportunity for outdoor seating for bars and restaurants, and other open space</p>
Disadvantages	<p>Must address street sweeping.</p> <p>New treatment in Kansas</p> <p>Parking can be confusing</p>	<p>Safety concerns backing into traffic</p> <p>Already sufficient total parking supply</p>	<p>Not enough activity to fill space</p> <p>Costly to maintain</p>
Recommendation	<p>Parking protected bike and scooter lanes create the greatest benefit at least cost, and can be designed to maintain existing diagonal parking</p>	<p>Low return on investment</p>	<p>Negative return on investment. Plazas can be created as needed by allowing merchants to put seating on sidewalk and in parking lane as appropriate</p>

What about the Median?

The median is an important space, and needs to be designed well, particularly if the street is being converted from five to three lanes.

	Planted median	Open median/left turn lanes	Pedestrian Refuges
Advantages	<p>Allows for an attractive tree canopy</p> <p>Serves as refuge for pedestrians crossing street</p>	<p>Allows for left turns into cross streets and driveways</p> <p>Can be used by emergency vehicles</p> <p>Can be used to bypass double-parked cars</p> <p>Can be used for loading by large delivery trucks</p> <p>Low cost</p> <p>Flexible</p>	<p>Significant improvement in pedestrian safety, especially at unsignalized crossings.</p> <p>Helpful for slower pedestrians to cross in two signal cycles</p>
Disadvantages	<p>On blocks with skewed intersections, left turn pockets fill most of median space</p> <p>Does not allow emergency vehicles to use to bypass traffic</p> <p>Does not allow motorists to use to bypass double-parked trucks</p> <p>More costly</p>	<p>Not as attractive as planted</p>	<p>Obstruct use of median for emergency vehicles</p>
Recommendation	<p>Not recommended.</p>	<p>Highly recommended for convenience and flexibility reasons.</p>	<p>Recommended at specific locations to support important unsignalized pedestrian crossings. Occasional refuges do not impede emergency services, and have a net positive impact on public safety</p>

How to Configure Bus Stops?

Designing the bus stop details becomes important once the other key decisions are made. We will want to think about their exact placement along the street, as well as the types of shelters and public amenities that are provided. The existing shelters are high quality, but if the city has the resources, smaller-profile, higher-amenity shelter may be more appropriate for the street. The core question, however, is whether buses should stop in the travel lane, blocking traffic behind, or in a pull-out, merging back into traffic after boarding passengers.

	Stop in Travel Lane	Stop in Pull-Out
Advantages	<p>Safer for all users, because it eliminates merging back into traffic</p> <p>Faster and more efficient for bus passengers</p>	<p>Less delay for motorists</p> <p>Significantly less irritation for motorists</p> <p>Motorists less likely to use oncoming traffic left turn pocket to bypass stopped bus</p>
Disadvantages	<p>Can be very irritating to motorists</p> <p>Can cause some motorists to drive unsafely</p>	<p>Bus delay</p> <p>Safety concerns as buses merge back into traffic</p>
Recommendation	<p>Wichita is not sufficiently urban, and transit ridership is not sufficiently high, to justify in-lane stops. As the city changes, it can easily retrofit if it chooses this option later.</p>	<p>Recommended.</p>

How to Configure Parking?

Douglas Avenue has some blocks with no parking, parallel parking, diagonal parking on one side, and diagonal parking on both sides. In addition, diagonal parking can be either head-in or back-in. Each has different advantages and disadvantages. Some residents and merchants are concerned about the real and perceived safety challenges of diagonal parking on a major street. Others enjoy the extra parking spaces.

	Parallel	Head-in Diagonal	Back-in Diagonal
Advantages	Very space efficient Can accommodate longer pickups and delivery trucks More street width to allocate to other functions	Most welcoming	Safer, and more comfortable leaving the parking space
Disadvantages	Fewer parking spaces than diagonal	Real and perceived safety challenges backing out	Atypical arrangement Confusing for some motorists
Recommendations	Should be default treatment.	For specific blocks with key merchants with high short-term parking demand, OK. No conflict with parking-protected bikeway	Parking protected bikeway significantly reduces safety concerns with head-in parking. Likely too unusual a treatment. Possible to convert head-in to back-in later.