

Train of thought

Businesses have varying opinions on effects of light rail

BY SUZANNA STAGEMEYER | STAFF WRITER

As city officials hash out the practicalities of Kansas City's light-rail plan, businesses involved in development and construction wonder whether the \$4 billion downtown renaissance will reach its full potential of projects without some type of mass public transit.

"Public transit is the only way to do it Downtown," said Kite Singleton, a Kansas City architect and longtime light-rail advocate. "You can't cram more cars into the space, and there are blank walls along sidewalks where there used to be storefronts."

The city's 27-mile, \$1 billion-plus plan, approved by voters in November, faces a repeal effort in part because of implementation difficulties an alternatives analysis has detailed.

But should a system run through Downtown where a starter line has been suggested, many involved in development and construction anticipate that it would change the type of buildings being built and further drive development in the city's core.

Along Denver's 35-mile light-rail system, 2.5 million square feet of retail, 2.6 million square feet of office space and 9,635 residential units have been added.

"As we have built projects around the country, we've observed that when transit stations go in, there's typically ancillary development that goes around it as a result of the groups of people who move through the stops," said Greg Nook, an executive vice president of JE Dunn Construction Co. "Every one of our offices is well aware of past successes we've had with those projects."

Transportation opportunities, whether new roads, interchanges or public transit lines, drive development. But for a downtown area that lacks open spaces for new roads, fixed transit lines can be what brings people Downtown.

"Light rail and public transit are pieces of a transportation system," said Daniel Serda, a city planner and director of the nonprofit Kansas City Design Center. "We have a tendency to put them in their own bubble, and they're not. ... As transportation infrastructure, their impact has more to do with organizing development than driving development, especially in an urban core where one of the chief problems has been disinvestment."

Downtown isn't on the verge of being finished — it's just beginning — and a primary factor in its success will be access, Serda said.

If more people used public transit, real estate currently filled by parking garages could become less necessary as a garage and more valuable as a store or office building. City zoning and parking requirements probably would change, Singleton said.

That would have financial ramifications for businesses, which may pay more than \$30,000 per structured parking spot, compared with about \$5,000 a spot in the suburbs, where space



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Architect Kite Singleton is a longtime light-rail proponent. He says light-rail would reduce the need for parking garages in Downtown, freeing up space for businesses. "Public transit is the only way to do it."

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allows for flat paved parking lots instead of structures, Serda said.

“If you can save those, it cuts costs significantly,” said Singleton, who also is a member of Kansas City’s light-rail residents’ task force and the Regional Transit Alliance board.

Kansas City planners are working on a new development code that would slightly decrease the number of parking spaces required with new developments, City Planner Patty Noll said. They hope for the City Council to adopt the new code by year’s end.

Office and manufacturing buildings within 500 feet of rapid-transit stops wouldn’t have to provide off-street parking spaces for the first 10,000 square feet of floor space; retail buildings wouldn’t have to provide off-street parking for the first 4,000 square feet of floor area; restaurants wouldn’t have to provide off-street parking for the first 2,000 square feet.

“We have other means of transportation and should promote other means of transportation,” Noll said. “We’re trying to prohibit excess parking spaces, which create sprawl and take up valuable land.”

In turn, developers can earn higher rates of return on office buildings and retail than on parking garages.

But the jury’s still out as to whether fixed transit draws more development — and correspondingly more business for those involved in new construction — than would otherwise have come. Some

point to light rail as having more of an effect on where developments are instead of how many there are. Others say public transit convenience would attract more people and, correspondingly, more development.

“If you make a city easier to live in, it’s more likely that you would have additional development,” Nook said. “If you’re spread out, it becomes difficult to do anything.”

Cities with thriving downtowns have effective mass-transit systems, he said.

“If it were to be a light-rail system, I think history has proved that in many other cities the size of Kansas City, light rail is in fact a driver of additional development,” said Bob Marcusse, CEO of the Kansas City Area Development Council. “Far beyond the question of if regional transit will spur development is a broader question: Is this the next necessary piece of infrastructure to keep the Kansas City region competitive? I think the answer is more and more becoming that it is.”

Business owners have mixed feelings about the effects of a possible light-rail system.

Some dread the prospect.

“Light rail is really a misnomer — there’s nothing light about it,” said Greg Allen, who is on the petition committee to repeal the light-rail plan and a past president of the Broadway Westport Council.

Allen, co-owner of Allen Financial Corp., which is near the light-rail route voters approved last year, said light rail with its wires, tracks and exclusive rights

of way would physically disrupt his business.

“There would be no on-street parking or left-hand turns,” Allen said. “It would be a huge obstruction to conventional traffic, a huge disruption.”

But other businesses react more positively to the idea.

The Main Street Corridor Development Corporation and Community Improvement District, or MainCor, board decided in 2001 that it would support light rail down Main Street because of the increased vitality it could bring.

“We welcome it, but we also want to make sure that it is designed appropriately for everybody involved,” MainCor Executive Director Diane Burnette said.

They would want adequate parking, street width and sidewalk space preserved, she said.

Mass transit isn’t the deciding factor in economic success or development, said Blake Schreck, president of the Lenexa Chamber of Commerce. In Lenexa, new roads, for example, have drawn shopping centers, a hospital and residential developments. Growth and development follows the varying types of infrastructure, he said.

“I don’t think development would slow down (Downtown) without fixed transit,” Schreck said. “We’re still watching what will happen with the Sprint Center and Power & Light District. But just another piece of a world-class city is having some transit options. ... I see the metro working on this for many years to come.”