

A vibrant urban center needs public transit

By KITE SINGLETON
Guest Columnist

Some years ago I found an aerial photographic comparison of Kansas City's downtown in 1940 and 1981, showing how the vibrant street life of Kansas City had succumbed to our motorized lifestyle. That tight, consistent pattern of commercial activity had become eroded by the creeping scourge of parking.

Anyone over 60 years of age watched this happen. As automobile popularity rose, the demand for parking escalated. Businesses without parking failed, their buildings were torn down, and the neighboring store used the empty space for parking until it failed. This process has continued for 50 years or more. We see it every day as we drive by and walk by parking lots and garages.

J. C. Nichols saw this pattern developing and created the concept of a "shopping center," where ade-



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quate free parking was provided. The growth of the **Country Club Plaza** parallels the decline of downtown, but it wasn't just parking that achieved that success.

Nichols selected a location between two of the city's most active streetcar lines and built high-rise apartments surrounding his shopping center, delivering shoppers to his stores without the need for parking. Few shopping centers since have recognized what he saw. Most rely totally on automobile access.

More recent Plaza history shows perceptive retailing decisions to forsake the everyday needs of local shoppers for the high-end national retailers and restaurants, and the refusal to allow a linear foot of sidewalk to be fronted by the growing parking supply.

Downtown, by comparison, lost its way, clamoring for more parking while forgetting that a discontinuous sidewalk experience is the death knell of the small retailer.

This is not a "chicken and egg" situation. Parking in a city without an active public transit system is a re-

quirement. Look at the new **IRS Center**: thousands of employees of an agency that could encourage employees to use public transit. But in Kansas City the builders are forced to provide parking at a rate of four spaces per 1,000 square feet of office space because the developers need an "exit strategy" in case the IRS ends its lease and the developers have to find another tenant unable to encourage transit ridership.

By contrast, in the reconstruction of ground zero in New York City, with its excellent public transit system, the ratio is planned at about one parking space per 1,000 square feet of office space. At a cost of some \$20,000 to \$30,000 per garage space, this adds up to a major disadvantage for development in the center of our metropolitan area.

All this is particularly pertinent in relation to the "Smart Moves Plan" that is being presented in Topeka and Jefferson City this month. This regional funding mechanism for increased public transit has gained significant support in the past four or five years, and a new poll, taken after the gas price spike last summer, shows even more promise in voters' readiness to help fund a

seamless, regional transit network.

Two recent experiences in Kansas City bode well for the future of transit in this community:

■ The transit-only lane established this past summer to relieve congestion during the closing of the Paseo Bridge generated a significant increase in ridership on several Northland bus routes.

■ The new **MAX** rapid bus on Main Street between downtown and the Plaza has created a 40 percent increase in ridership in the old Country Club corridor.

Kansas Citians are no different from citizens of any other city that has recently upped its investment in transit. We all start with a predisposition to our beloved cars. But when the new transit option is presented, we discern some advantages in it and we use it. All of these new transit systems are thriving.

Vibrant urban centers are supported by sophisticated public transit systems. The Plaza is a jewel, but it is an anomaly, and its reliance on parking — at these enormous construction costs — will now start to limit its growth.

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COMMENTARY

TRANSIT: System needed to bring region together

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Yes, downtown has begun to rebound during the term of Mayor Kay Barnes. But, like the Plaza, parking costs will limit the potential for a resurgence that will let Kansas City successfully compete with our sister cities.

It is only a robust, service-oriented, seamless transit network that will allow us to reach the goal of a 24-7, active and exciting urban center, connected from the Missouri River to the Plaza. And Smart Moves includes rubber tire and rail connectors to and between suburban communities that will enliven them and knit the region together in a way that our freeway system never has — a way without increasing congestion and parking demand, a way that will reduce the stress and wasted time of driving, a way that will save on transportation costs for families, a way that will reduce our reliance on oil, and a way that will put citizens face to face in a transit vehicle and on a

sidewalk, to rekindle our urban vitality.

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