

Why Light Rail, Kansas City?



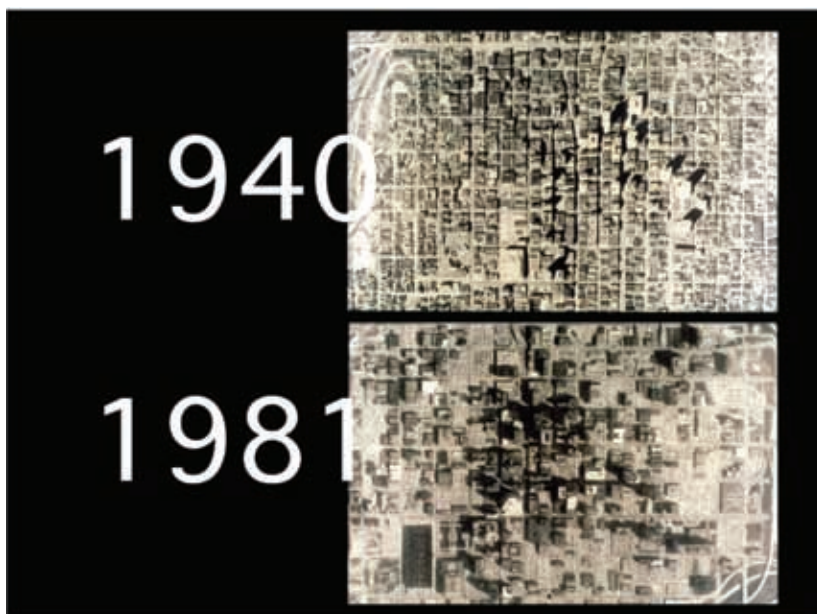
When Jesse Clyde Nichols began development of the “first automobile-oriented shopping district” in 1923, there were 15,000,000 cars in the United States (Note the filling station in this early photo). Over the next 80 years the popularity of cars gained so much momentum that today there are some 250,000,000 cars in our country, and the demand for parking has spawned some 8 parking spaces for each car. The cost of this infrastructure has now outstripped our capacity to build or to maintain it, as demonstrated in the reports on sub-standard bridge structures after the Minneapolis bridge collapse. The impact of this demand for parking and roads on the quality of our built environment – outside the Country Club Plaza – has been devastating.



This 1940 map of Kansas City shows one of the nation’s leading transit systems, using streetcars, and electric and diesel busses. This system provided 135,000,000 passenger boardings in 1922, 1945 and 1946. Our current system provided only about 15,000,000 in 2007, including a very healthy continuing increase in ridership along the Main Street corridor, thanks to enthusiastic acceptance of the MAX bus rapid transit service.



General Eisenhower became so impressed by the *autobahns* he saw in Germany, that when he became president, he promoted the idea of an American *autobahn* system on the basis of its use as a military distribution system. In 1991 a “final estimate” for the system was ordered, producing a \$128.9 Billion estimate for the 42,795 miles of the actual Interstate Highway System (not including turnpikes and freeways built under other auspices). When was the last time you saw a military convoy on our interstate system?



These aerial images of downtown Kansas City demonstrate how parking demand eroded the consistent pattern of commercial action that had been built around this city’s excellent public transit system. This cancerous, long-term destruction so visible from an aerial photograph is only more devastating on the ground, where blocks full of parked cars and blank garage faces result in a streetscape that is devoid of the kind of consistent shop-fronts and business action that encourage visiting a commercial center. In the face of this negative condition, the current development resurgence in Kansas City’s urban center reflects desire for a more compact urban condition. As this resurgence grows, the demand for a more robust transit service that allows urban dwellers to reduce auto dependence will grow commensurately. The negative impact of parking will be reduced and small scale commercial and retail business will return.



Urban planner Gene Boles shows in this demonstration how spatially voracious the car is in our urban environment: in scene #1 a large number of cars fills the street from curb to curb; in scene #3, the same number of motorists sit in the middle of the same street...without their cars. Current Kansas City real estate market demand is for 4 cars for each 1,000 square feet of commercial space. At 300 square feet per space, that means the required parking takes more space than the productive space of the commercial tenant ($4 \times 300 = 1,200$ square feet of parking to serve 1,000 square feet of commercial space). In an urban setting, then, multiply each parking space by \$30,000 to \$40,000 for the cost of a garage. It's no wonder developers are asking subsidies for parking garages. But would you rather subsidize a developer's parking garage or use your tax dollars to make our urban center truly competitive, with an attractive transit system that reduces the congestion and pollution downtown brought by those cars we're subsidizing?



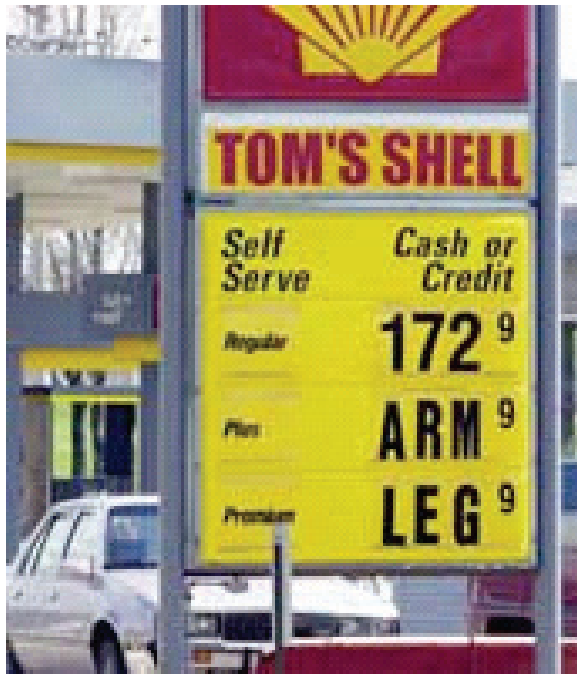
Here's the Power & Light District sub-grade parking garage under construction last year south of the Town Pavilion garage. When garages are built next to or under commercial space, tenants drive into their garage, go directly from garage to building, never needing to use the sidewalk. The result of this condition in downtown Kansas City has been that nearly the only people on the sidewalk are those who cannot afford cars. And the impact on retail and other commercial development downtown has been clearly demonstrated over the past 50 years. A transit trip begins and ends on a sidewalk, and a new investment in transit will encourage "discretionary" transit patrons to get on board, perhaps saving the cost of one of their cars. This is not rocket science: just experience a transit-oriented city like Chicago, Washington, DC, and many others, where dense pedestrian traffic makes sidewalks active, attractive and safe. And when potential customers are walking by your store, you will make sure your windows are washed, your pavement clean and not cracked. Pedestrian density on sidewalks makes vast improvement in the quality of our built environment.

Regional Transit Investment Per

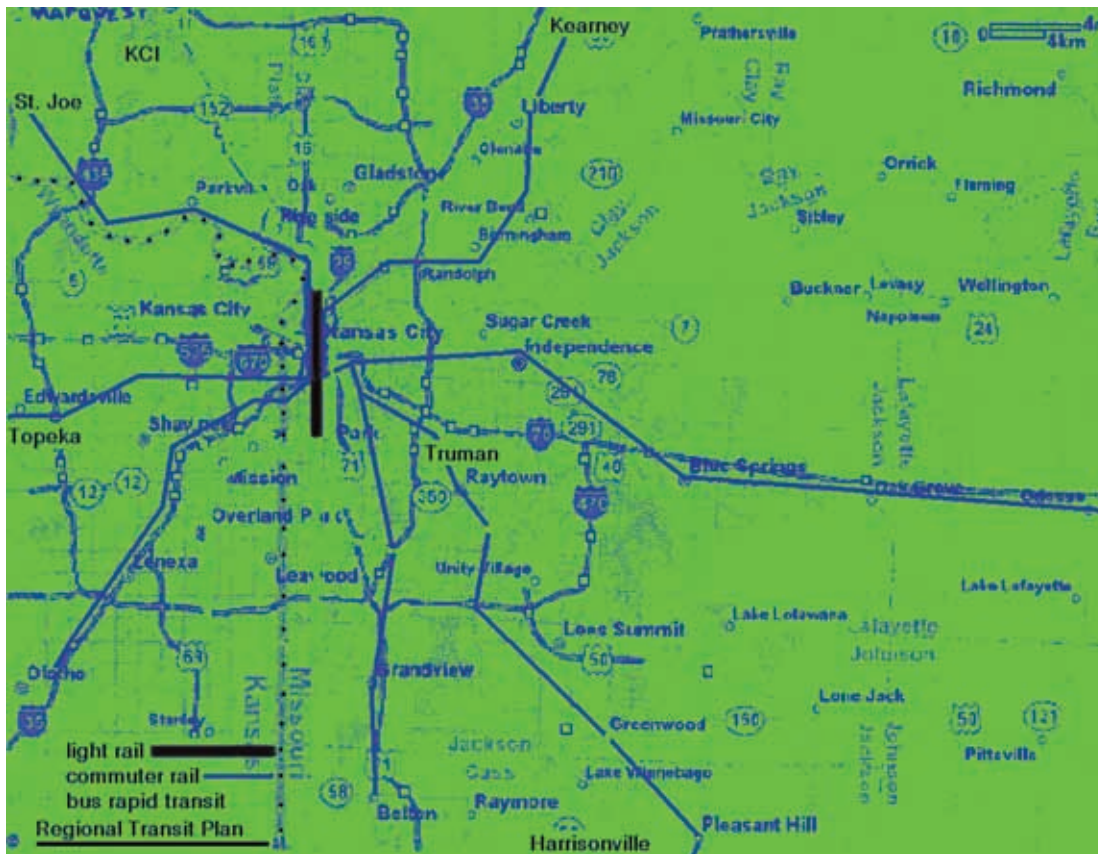
Metropolitan Area Per Capita (*Multiple Providers)	Population	Operating Budget (Millions of Dollars)
Portland \$107.73	2,112,802	\$227.62
Denver \$100.26	2,318,355	\$232.43
Cleveland* \$80.13	2,908,439	\$233.06
Salt Lake City \$76.79	1,247,554	\$95.80
Milwaukee-Racine \$76.04	1,636,572	\$124.45
Dallas-Fort Worth* \$68.47	4,683,013	\$320.68
Minneapolis-St. Paul	2,792,137	\$169.60

Source: 2004 National Transit
Database

Kansas City's investment in public transit is very low in comparison with our sister cities. It's no wonder, therefore, that the public perception of transit in our community is so low. Without a breakthrough in this investment picture, this perception and this paucity of transit service will persist. Most of our sister cities that have started back on the transit road had to overcome the same kinds of opposition to this change. Statements like "you'll never get Denver residents out of their cars" have preceded virtually every new American light rail investment, and it was not until a tiny light rail starter line was put in place that this negative mindset was overcome. After some twenty years of transit investment, Denver recently passed a regional election that provides some \$3 Billion in transit revenue for an enormous expansion of their transit system.



It wasn't long ago that a gas retailer's sense of humor was stimulated by 172.9 cent gas prices. In a later news photo, from March of 2008, that sense of humor seems to have disappeared. Rising fuel prices are causing us all to re-evaluate our budgets, and in preparation for Kansas City's next light rail election in November of 2008, this gas price situation is perhaps the best way to focus the voters' attention on the need for a new approach to transportation in our city. At the same time, there should be no expectation that light rail will relieve our freeways of their growing congestion. Parking and congestion remain problematic even in cities that are well served by public transit. But what a robust transit network *does* promise is an alternative to the congestion-snarled commute and the rising price of owning and operating a car. And for the economic development of our urban center, attractive transit service offers to reduce the market demand for the high ratios of parking that discourage building at the urban center.



If the proposed light rail starter line can be kept to a manageable size, it may be possible to include in the ballot a series of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) lines that extend to serve a wider network, even in Phase One. The Troost BRT has already been funded, preliminary engineering is underway and it almost certainly will be operational before light rail. The Unified Government has currently under contract planning for a BRT line from downtown Kansas City, MO to the Nascar Speedway. Overland Park's *Vision Metcalf* is proposing a BRT line, and other BRT lines may emerge due to strong encouragement from the Federal Transit Administration for this cost-effective transit option. The *commuter rail mode* is a longer range vision that would connect a series of regional communities into the envisioned regional network and be more reasonably supported through the *Regional Investment Fund* legislation already passed in Missouri.

"Beware the risks of an auto-city"

Curtis Johnson's CITISTATES re

"Time's a-wasting, Kansas Ci

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bidding to become strong 21

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