

The Downtown Circulator Report

Urban Design Forum – April 2009

One of the highlights of Transit Week was the Urban Design Forum hosted by Transit Now Nashville and the Nashville Civic Design Center to discuss the design of a downtown circulator. We were very pleased with the turnout, particularly the number of design professionals. We started the evening with a brief overview of previous studies, best practices, and peer cities, and then went into a three stage mapping exercise. The crowd was broken into three teams. During stage 1, each team identified the assets they thought should be served by a downtown circulator. During stage 2, they each designed a "money is no object" ideal route. During stage 3, they had to prioritize their routes' service features using a "taping" exercise developed by Transit Now. The tape exercise represented a simplified cost comparison based upon the relative operational costs as determined by vehicle frequency, hours served, and other factors. We used colored tape to represent four options:

White tape = basic service with 10 minute headways, M-F business day hours
Yellow tape = increased frequency with 5 minute headways
Red tape = increased hours with evening and weekend service
Blue tape = increased frequency and increased hours

Each table was given approximately "5.5 miles" of white tape. The map scale was 1 inch equals 400 feet, so they each got 72 inches of white tape (72" equaled 28,800 feet, or 5.45 miles). They could use all of this tape toward covering the ideal route they had already identified in the previous stage, or use some or all of it to buy enhanced miles. For simplicity's sake, the tape was dispensed in standard lengths (white in 12" strips, yellow and red in 8" strips, and blue in 6" strips). The teams could trade one for one a longer white piece of tape for a shorter piece of tape of another color. So, for example, they could choose to make their entire route with increased frequency and enhanced hours and receive 36" of blue tape. They could choose to use a mix of tape colors, as long as the total didn't exceed an amount equal to 72" of white tape. For comparison, Chattanooga operates a 1.5 mile route with extended hours and 5 minute headways. The cost for their system in this exercise would be 20 inches of blue tape, equal to 40 inches (3 miles) of white tape.

Table 1

Table 1 concentrated on assets in Downtown and in the nearby East Nashville and Vandy areas, including employment centers, the Farmer's Market, LP Field, the Gulch, and Vanderbilt University. Their ideal, cost is no limit route served all of these assets, stretching from Five Points in the east to the edge of the University. When they had to prioritize the route, they decided to endorse a 7-day a week route with evening hours and 10-minute headways. They served two loops, one in the core, one in Midtown by Vandy, joined by an axis along Broadway.

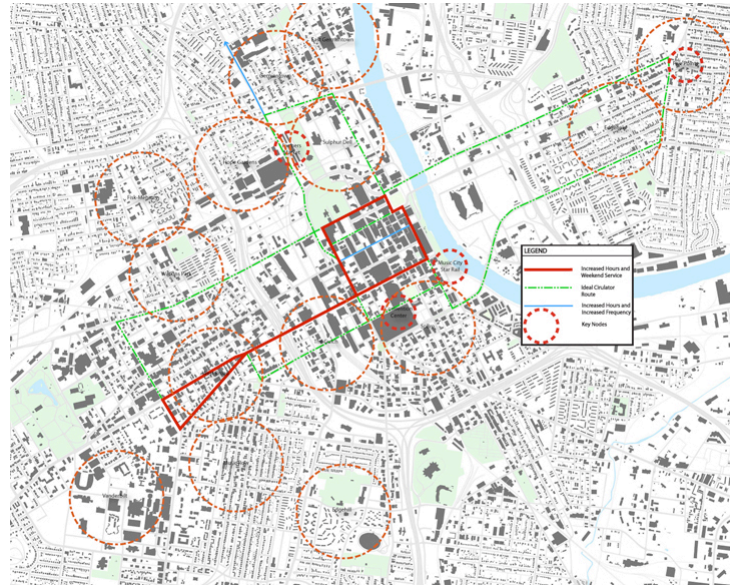


Table 2

Table 2 concentrated on assets centered around downtown, with linkages to the Gulch, SoBro and Metro Offices, over to the Farmers Market and Germantown, plus across the river to LP Field (with the assumption that the current Park N'Ride would be replaced with this circulator). Ideally, there would be a link from the Gulch on Division St. over to the Metro offices on 2nd Ave., but currently it's cut off by the railroad tracks. This would allow for the circulator to flow through the Gulch over to Metro and back downtown along 2nd Ave. and into the central business district.



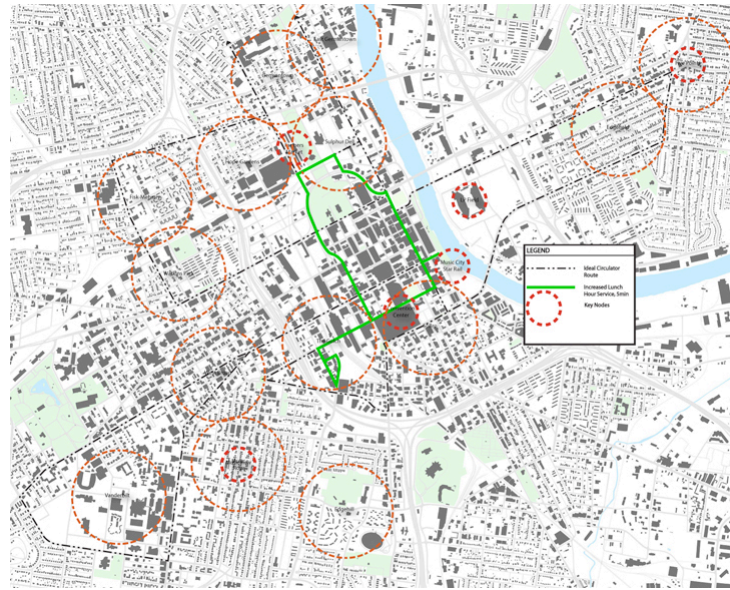
When they had to prioritize their route, the first thing they realized was that they needed to have some higher frequency buses with extended hours in the core. The Blue Route serves that purpose and allows employees to get around the core quickly and easily, but also serves the late-hour tourist market. Since LP Field hosts basic M-F business-hour commuters, the White Route would be limited to the base 10-minute headway, business-hour set up it currently uses. The Red route would be for extended hours and weekends only and would

allow movement between the core and the increasingly denser, diversified market the Gulch represents. With this scheme, residents of the Gulch could travel downtown and tourists could visit the restaurants in the Gulch seven days a week and into the evening.

Table 3

Table 3 identified their assets to be served by a circulator in terms of neighborhoods or areas. Their vision, without budget constraints, focused on the idea that transit should loop like cloverleaves or petals into the surrounding ring neighborhoods. The concept was to connect these neighborhoods on the plan with transit.

Their Downtown priority loop would have a 7-day a week route with evening hours and 12 minute headways. The line would serve 8th Avenue, to the Farmer's Market, then 2nd Avenue and loop back on Demonbreun with another section of the Circulator that ties in the Gulch area. This Circulator is the largest of the three proposed scenarios in the Downtown core but existing bus lines could be modified with the proposal. Table 3 also discussed the need for the light rail spine down Broadway to the Vandy area.



The green tape was an innovation that table 3 requested on the fly. It included shorter headways during lunch hours and the 12 minute headways at other times. Facilitators fit it into the Charrette method by allowing it in increments of 7", compared to the 6" blue tape and the 8" red or yellow tape.

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Conclusion

The three schemes developed by the Charrette participants represent three unique approaches to implementing a downtown circulator, but each emphasizes the importance of linking key assets, serving both tourists and locals, and of beginning to better connect Downtown with its surrounding neighborhoods. It is the position of Transit Now that the circulator should be seen as the spine of an integrated transit system that offers all Nashvillians an alternative form of getting to work, home, school, or play.