INTRODUCTION

The Close the Gap Plan encourages more walkable, livable cities, suburbs and neighborhoods. The Vision calls for expanding transportation choices, including a robust transit system, which is fast, convenient and easy to use. This is a Summary of the Close the Gap White Paper that analyzed potential corridors suitable for transit service and redevelopment.

BENEFITS OF ENHANCED TRANSPORTATION

Access to Jobs and Education
As jobs locate in the peripheries where land is more readily available, it is difficult for potential employees in the urban core to access employment and educational opportunities. Transit connects people to opportunities and reduces household expenses as transportation accounts for as much as 58% of household expenses for those living below the poverty line.

Attract and Retain Talent
Companies face increased competition to attract talent, and the Omaha region has experienced “brain drain” recently (we lose more residents with college degrees than we gain). Quality of life, such as the ability to walk, bike and take quality transit service are increasingly important factors in these decisions.

Create Great, Vibrant Places
Communities that are walkable and vibrant are popular throughout the country, especially among young adults and empty nesters. Transportation options are essential to create walkable communities in Downtown Omaha as well as neighborhood and town centers elsewhere in the metro area.

Foster More Active Lifestyles to Improve Public Health
Transit systems help people live healthy, active lifestyles by connecting them to jobs and providing opportunity for walking or biking at each end of the trip. Evidence supports the positive health impacts of transportation, which is why the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) now promotes public transportation.

Relieve Traffic Congestion
The Omaha metro area’s growing population will continue to result in increased traffic congestion. According to a recent major study, by 2040 the time spent by each household in a vehicle could increase by 45% without additional investments in the system. By relieving pressure on roads, even those who do not use transit will benefit from it.

Save Public Funds through More Cost-Effective Infrastructure
Improving transit in existing areas catalyzes infill development, helping to take care of areas with existing infrastructure. The Heartland 2050 Plan showed that a more compact development pattern will save $4.4 billion in expenditures on infrastructure and other needed public services by 2050.
The Close the Gap Plan proposes several key corridors for premium transit service that includes more frequent service with premium technology and permanent infrastructure. Many of these corridors build on previous plans, and connect the region’s job and entertainment centers and, most importantly, community colleges and universities. Feeder routes would connect the priority corridors to neighborhoods. This is a conceptual stage – specific routes will require additional study and refinement.

**Priorities Transportation Corridors**

**East-West Regional Spine**

**Dodge – Broadway**

This corridor runs from Metro Community College (MCC) in Elkhorn on the west to Iowa Western Community College on the east. This extends Metro’s Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project that will run along the Dodge corridor from Westroads to Downtown Omaha. Currently, Metro provides bus service on this corridor with Route 2, Blue-Yellow Routes, and Route 92 Dodge Express in the peak hour.

**North-South Regional Spine**

**30th – 24th – Fort Crook**

This corridor runs from Florence on the north to Offutt Air Force Base on the south. It provides connections to MCC’s Fort Omaha Campus, North Omaha, Creighton University, Downtown Omaha, Metro Omaha South Omaha Campus and South Omaha, Bellevue University and Offutt. Currently, Metro provides bus service on this corridor with Routes 30, 24, and Route 95 Bellevue Express in the peak hour.

**Downtown to UNMC Streetcar**

The streetcar provides an important economic development and mobility connection, and would connect North Downtown to UNMC along Farnam or Harney Streets. Potential expansions include connections to Henry Doorly Zoo, Eppley Airfield, and North Omaha. Currently, Metro provides bus service on this corridor with Route 15.

**72nd & 84th Street Corridor**

This runs from Immanuel Medical Center on the north to Midlands Hospital on the south. It connects the 72nd Street employment corridor, College of St. Mary, Ralston, La Vista, and Papillion. Currently, Metro provides bus service on portions of this corridor with Routes 18, 13, 55, and Route 93 South 84th Express in the peak hour.

**Center and Maple Corridors**

These run from West Omaha to UNMC along the Center and Maple corridors, connecting to the UNMC area via Saddle Creek Road. Currently, Metro provides bus service on portions of these corridors with Routes 4 and 15.
CURRENT SERVICE

According to the Regional Transit Vision conducted in 2013, Metro manages its costs and services successfully relative to peer agencies. However, without new funding sources, maintaining or improving transit services will be extremely difficult. In 2015 Metro adjusted its system to increase the number of routes that run frequently. Still, only a few bus routes arrive every 15 minutes – the minimum standard that sparks “spontaneous use” and increased ridership.

**KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL TRANSIT:**

- **High frequency** to improve predictability
- **Land use** that provides the critical mass needed to make transit work
- **Direct routes** with fewer stops to get riders where they’re going – quickly.
- New technologies to add **coverage** of the region

**TRANSIT TECHNOLOGIES**

**Bus Rapid Transit (BRT)**
BRT provides faster, high-frequency service with many features associated typically with rail service, such as traffic signal priority, pre-paid boarding, substantial stations, and it may include dedicated lanes and buses with unique branding.

**Streetcar / Light Rail Transit (LRT)**
It may run in its own right-of-way on dedicated track or can even run alongside the street or in a median. Streetcars run typically as urban circulators and are designed to attract high-value development. LRT stations are spaced half to one mile apart typically and can reach high speeds. Currently, these technologies are blending and can be combined in a single line.

**Commuter Rail**
Commuter rail service provides rail service between cities and towns throughout the larger region. Commuter rail services utilize railroad passenger cars and are propelled typically by diesel or electric power.

**Autonomous and Demand-Responsive Transit**
Advances are being made in autonomous, or "self-driving" transit. These include smaller micro-transit shuttles that carry up to 12 passengers to full-size buses. In addition, many transit companies are providing demand-response service or are partnering with companies such as Lyft and Uber to connect passengers on the “last-mile” of their trip to and from the transit system.

**Annual transit funding per capita**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Annual Transit Funding per Capita</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Omaha</td>
<td>$37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Average</td>
<td>$90</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minneapolis-St. Paul</td>
<td>$189</td>
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<td>Denver</td>
<td>$206</td>
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<td>Salt Lake City</td>
<td>$229</td>
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RIDERSHIP AND LAND USE IMPACT

The priority transportation corridors capture the densest concentrations of residents and employees in the region. Hundreds of thousands live or work within walking distance (1/4 mile) of the corridors. With enhanced transit service and accelerated redevelopment, these numbers will increase.

Today, Metro’s system averages 15,000 riders per day. With Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) installed along the corridors, the system would increase ridership dramatically along the corridors to an estimated 62,000 riders per day by 2040, more than four times the system’s total current ridership. Another scenario extended the proposed Streetcar westward as a Light Rail (LRT) line that connects UNMC to Aksarben Village and then runs westward along the West Center corridor to Oak View Mall near 144th Street. This line would attract 15,000 trips per day in 2040, and together with the BRT lines would result in more than 90,000 riders per day by 2040.

The analysis represents a significant enough number of trips to reduce traffic congestion and increase mobility dramatically. It would place the Omaha region’s transit usage near the level of larger regions such as St. Louis, Austin, and Minneapolis-St. Paul.

COSTS OF PREMIUM TRANSIT

Costs of building transit service vary widely based on the unique characteristics of each corridor, but general ranges based on technology are shown in the graph to the right:

The costs are not insignificant, but they are attainable. While it is not a recommendation, a half-cent sales tax in Douglas and Sarpy Counties would generate nearly $1.5 billion by 2040. Non-local sources, such as Federal funds, would also be sought to build and operate an expanded regional transit system.

WANT MORE INFO?

Stay up to date with MAPA, Metro and the Heartland 2050 project at heartland2050.org