

# Transit Mall Feedback

A Response to the “Portland Transit Mall Revitalization Conceptual Design Report”

October 21, 2003

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## Background

This paper reflects feedback to various agencies regarding the proposals to bring light rail and renovations to the Portland transit mall.

In general, it is agreed that the proposed goals of revitalization and the need for light rail service on the transit mall are valid. This paper serves to stress important considerations and potential modifications to the Conceptual Design Report.

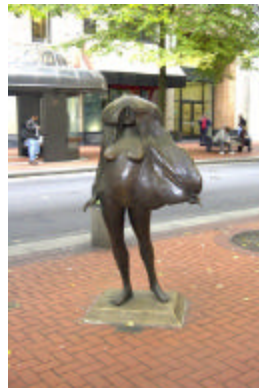
## Commitment to Existing Public Art

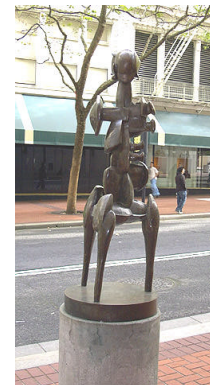
The current mall features a diverse array of public art in the form of sculptures and fountains. The proposed light rail alignments and changes to the right-of-way interfere with the current placement of many of the sculptures, and all of the fountains.

The City has developed an international reputation for the development and placement of public art, and is also known for its quantity and variety of public fountains.

The redevelopment of the Transit Mall should not inadvertently tarnish this reputation by haphazardly ignoring the heritage of art as a vital element in the mall’s character.

### *Sculptures in the current Transit Mall*





In an effort to preserve the work of artists and reinforce the general commitment of the City to public art, the following guidelines are recommended:

1. No art will be destroyed. If construction methods of original works prevent relocation without damage (such as fountains engineered for a particular sidewalk slope), those works should be duplicated with new construction in keeping with the original design and in consultation (if possible) with the original artist.
2. Art and fountains should be relocated within the downtown core if at all possible, preferably within walking distance.
3. If art cannot be relocated within the downtown core, it should be relocated within public spaces somewhere in the city.
4. As a last resort, art which cannot be relocated should be left for “adoption” by private businesses or individuals.

### *Fountains in the current Transit Mall*



### **Future Public Art**

The current Transit Mall north of Burnside (the “North Mall”), which was built after the original mall, curiously lacks any of the sculpture or fountains found in the areas south of Burnside.

This lack of art leads to a monolithic feel, with no visual cues from block to block to create a sense of place. While the current mall is to be lauded for its unifying design, its vitality is achieved through the use of sculpture and subtle variations to the main theme.

Furthermore, the lack of art in the northern section, combined with less robust shelters and a lack of shelter seating, creates a cheaper, almost neglected feel in the neighborhood.

It is recommended that public art is placed throughout the entire mall during revitalization, and that the same high quality of design and materials be used in the north sections as in the south and central sections.

## Trees

As noted in the Conceptual Design Report, the current usage of trees has generated some controversy.

In general, a canopy of street trees provides shelter from hot sun and light rain. In addition, trees provide for cleaner air and are aesthetically pleasing. From a design perspective, mature trees provide a sense of strength, permanence and longevity to an area.

The following are recommendations regarding tree selection and placement:

1. In order to maintain a large portion of mature trees along the mall, it is recommended that any tree replacement scheme be phased in over several years. By only replanting a few selected blocks each year, the mall will retain a heritage of mature trees while newly planted trees have a chance to grow. To replace large numbers of trees all at once would create a spartan, unsheltered feeling on the mall for years.
2. In the North Mall, more light appears to be blocked than in other parts of the mall. This may be due to the narrower streets or shorter height of the tree canopy. New spacing, and possibly a new species should be selected to create a higher canopy and block less light.
3. The current London Plane species used in most of the mall provides an excellent canopy height and overall shape, however the density of foliage and longevity of leaves into the fall season contribute to light blockage. If a replacement species is selected, it should be chosen for similar shape and canopy height, but with less overall foliage density and with an earlier loss of leaves in the fall.
4. Properties with large public plazas, such as the Standard Insurance center, allow more sunlight to reach the mall. Retaining the existing mature trees in these areas may be acceptable.
5. In some sections of the current mall (see photo), trees are planted in double rows. This leads to an extremely dense canopy which is dark even on the sunniest of days, and impedes pedestrian flow. The photo shows lighting conditions at 3PM on a cloudless October day. Double-rows should be avoided in a revitalized mall.



*A double-row of trees on 6<sup>th</sup> between Yamhill and Taylor*

## **Alignment Choice and Station Spacing**

The proposed alignment from Union Station southward should provide excellent service along the spine of downtown.

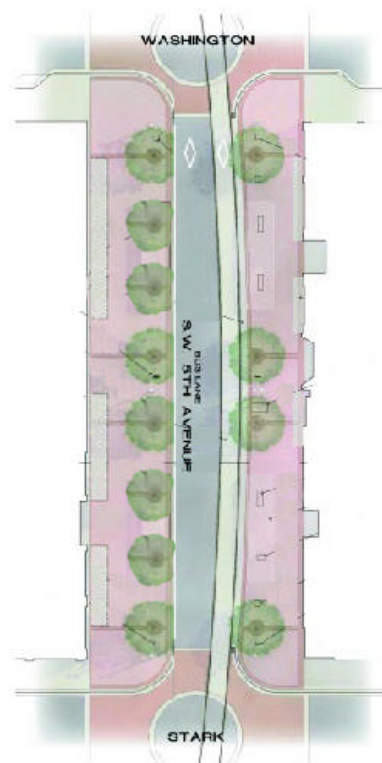
It is recommended that funding options be pursued to implement the full proposal all the way south to the PSU campus for maximum ridership and flexibility in train turning and scheduling.

The proposed spacing of light rail stations every 4 or 5 blocks should provide better average speeds than the current 2 block spacing of east-west light rail stations downtown. Signal automation, timing, and operating speed limits should be adjusted to maximize speed of operation.

Existing east-west light rail suffers from a perception of slow performance downtown. The transit mall alignment should also be viewed as an opportunity to slightly reduce the number of stops on the east-west line to improve operational speeds downtown.



It should be noted that the existence of Option B (Right Side) creates the opportunity to consider a new fourth option:



*Option "D"*

Option D (Right Side – Preserve Left-Side Pedestrian/Art ROW):

Because Option B allows trains and busses to crisscross paths operationally, all light rail boarding is accomplished on the right-hand side of the street. Therefore, if no automotive through-lane is established, all existing wide sidewalks featuring pedestrian areas, art and fountains could be maintained.

If the public demands that the existing pedestrian orientation with no auto access be maintained, option D may be an ideal solution.

Regarding Option C (Center Island) – this approach should be avoided if at all possible. Although the design drawings and simulations feature a guard rail, there will be a strong incentive for individuals who are in a hurry to jaywalk across the automotive lane or the bus lane in order to catch a train that is arriving. This is already a problem in San Francisco where center islands are used along portions of Market Street.

## Shelter Design

The current shelter design is unique to Portland and represents a bold architectural statement. Although the design has received negative criticism regarding a variety of features, it is recommended that the overall shape and signature of this design be preserved for future generations. A series of small design variations can mitigate problem issues.



*The current shelter design – a distinctive, signature feature of the Portland Transit Mall*

In addition to a unique look, the shelters offer the following advantages:

- \* They are large and can accommodate a large number of waiting passengers. This will grow in importance with the new light rail alignment – bus stops will be placed farther apart than before, concentrating more passengers into fewer stops.
- \* The glass end-panels provide protection from wind and blowing rain.
- \* Large signage areas within the shelter allow for easy-to-read maps, schedules, policies, and automated departure displays.

Over time, a variety of problems have been identified with the shelters, including:

- \* The large curved glass end-panels are custom-sized for every shelter and are very expensive to fabricate and replace.
- \* The tinted glass in the roof blocks the view of local business signage and awnings.
- \* Seating is limited (especially in the North Mall shelters.)
- \* Lighting is insufficient at night leading to a feeling of deteriorated safety



*Tinted roof glass appears almost opaque from some angles and blocks business signage.  
Large curved end-panels are custom sized based on sidewalk slope.*

Each of the identified problems may be mitigated by design changes without altering the overall shape of the structure:

### 1. Glass end-panel solutions

Currently, the glass panel size is determined by the height of the handrail from the sidewalk. Because the sidewalk slopes but the handrail height is constant, the end-panels at either end of a given structure will be different sizes.

The solution is to create a durable, easily maintained filler panel that rises beyond the railing height, and maintaining a constant size of curved glass. The curved glass panels could then be created in batches and stored for future use, minimizing overall cost. The filler panels could be all metal, or with a series of glass windows (fabricated from conventional flat glass) to improve lighting and visibility.



*Filler panels can accommodate sidewalk slope while allowing the large curved glass sections to remain a consistent size – easier to manufacture.*

If it is determined that the cost of glass is still prohibitive, removal of the glass entirely from shelters in problem areas will still provide for the basic shape of the shelter. The structure of remodeled shelters should accommodate for the future choice of glass removal.

## 2. Roof panels

Because of the already-shaded nature of the transit mall (tall buildings, street trees), tinted glass is not a necessity. It is recommended that the roof panels be replaced with clear glass to help mitigate the visibility concerns of some businesses.

As mentioned, the unique “mushroom” shape of the shelters is a signature of the Portland Transit Mall. If it is determined that a switch to clear glass would not adequately mitigate the visibility issue, as a last resort the glass may be removed entirely. The metal superstructure of the shelters will still provide the distinctive shape. In place of the original glass, a hidden, interior glass roof made of sloped, flat panels may be substituted.

## 3. Seating

The South and Central Transit Mall shelters feature limited seating – just a few seating positions inside plus the outside railing. A series of “pod” style stools could be added to the middle – unobtrusive for large crowds, and readily visible for nighttime security.



*Small concrete stools could provide unobtrusive seating with high nighttime visibility.*

## 4. Lighting

Increased brightness deters crime and discourages loitering. In addition to more lighting for these practical reasons, decorative lighting could be used to make the shelters stand out at night: Bright uplights could illuminate the canopy acting as a beacon to travelers, while a timer could shut off any uplights after operational hours have ended to save energy.

## 5. Preservation

The current shelters represent a unique architectural experiment. If it is decided that the current shelter design must go, identify opportunities to place existing shelters in public spaces for use as gazebos, rain shelters, etc. Allow private citizens to “adopt” discarded shelters as landscape elements.

## Paving Material / Intersection Design Treatments

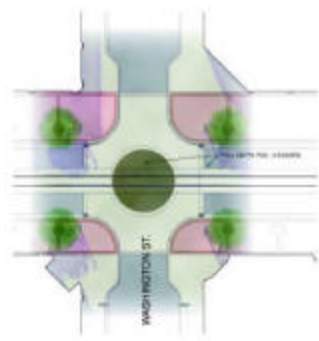
The current intersection treatments represent a high quality of design and materials. It is understood, however, that over time these materials have proven difficult and expensive to maintain.

The Conceptual Design Report shows several alternatives. Because of the public benefit of preserving an attractive Transit Mall appearance reflective of the other high quality materials in the mall, the pure asphalt with thermoplastic stripping method would be undesirable.

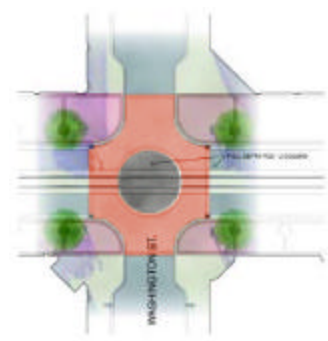
Using less expensive, easily maintained materials is a worthy goal, but must be done in a way that preserves the overall look of the current treatments. The suggested alternative of replacing existing materials with full-depth concrete is intriguing, and would be acceptable if the concrete can be colored (and perhaps textured) to simulate the current red paver layout.



*Asphalt diminishes the look.*



*Full-depth concrete is easy to maintain.*



*Recommended:  
Colored/textured full-depth concrete would mimic the current treatment.*

As an aside, one of the light rail simulation videos shown by Tri-Met (the video showing the right-side boarding, crisscross operation) shows the intersection circle treatments as being off-center. This use of asymmetry may have been accidental in the video, but it detracts from the sight-lines of streets and sidewalks, and should be avoided. The current circles are centered with respect to the street width, and such placement should be preserved.



*The off-center intersection circle shown in the simulation video violates the symmetry of the intersection.*

## Summary of Key Points

### Public Art

- \* Existing public art and fountains should be preserved by relocation, adoption
- \* New public art should be commissioned for North Mall

### Trees

- \* Phase in tree replacement over time to prevent spartan appearance
- \* North Mall could benefit from fewer trees per block, taller species
- \* When selecting replacement species, aim for current height/shape, less foliage density
- \* Public plaza areas mitigate problems with current tree species, need no changes
- \* Double-rows of trees block too much light and sidewalk area, should be avoided

### Alignment Choice and Station Spacing

- \* Recommend full-length alignment to PSU
- \* Consider opportunities to reduce number of stations on existing east-west lines

### Street Configuration

- \* Avoid automobile pull-outs, they make the sidewalks too narrow
- \* Offer new hybrid options that maximize pedestrian ROW, "Option D"
- \* Avoid island design as it presents dangers to pedestrians

### Shelter Design

- \* Existing design is signature and unique, can be preserved with modest updates
- \* Maintainability can be improved by standardizing on glass size by design modification
- \* Seating can be improved by use of small concrete stools in center area
- \* Shelters, if replaced by new design, should be preserved by finding new uses

### Paving Material

- \* Avoid the asphalt/thermoplastic stripping alternative
- \* Explore full-depth concrete solution using colored concrete to mimic current treatment
- \* Preserve symmetry of current intersection circle design

## Contact

Bob Richardson is a Portland resident and property owner. The household is located just 1.5 blocks from a major MAX station, and light rail is used every day for commuting and numerous weekends for shopping and special events.

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This document and related links may be found online at:

<http://www.bobrichardson.com/transitmall.html>