

An Advisory Statement by the Commission of Architectural Review on the City of Richmond's Proposal for Bus Rapid Transit

The Commission of Architectural Review (CAR) respectfully offers the following recommendations on the proposed Bus Rapid Transit System (BRT) through downtown Richmond. We do so in recognition of the duties delegated by Council to CAR which include the charge to "Assist and advise the city council, the mayor, the chief administrative officer, the planning commission, the board of zoning appeals, property owners and individuals in matters involving the historic resources relating to appropriate land use, zoning, and other issues" (Code 1993 § 32-930.0; Ord. No. 2004-360-330, § 1, 12-13-2004). We appreciate the time taken by GRTC staff to meet with representatives and staff of the CAR to discuss the proposed BRT system.

The Broad Street corridor through downtown Richmond has long been its commercial and retail core. The early-20th Century streetcar system, running through the median, ensured Broad Street's long reign as a thriving economic corridor, serving as the site of many hotels, restaurants, department stores, and independent businesses of every imaginable category. The Broad Street corridor through downtown Richmond has seen an influx of development in recent years, largely spurred by the private investment of small business owners. This investment has created a wide assortment of restaurants, galleries, retail shops, hotels, and apartments. Beginning in the 1970s, and continuing through the present day, a series of state and national historic districts have been created along this corridor. The resulting rehabilitation tax credit projects have fueled the rebirth of Broad Street, bringing new independent businesses into the area, and lending economic support to long-standing establishments in the corridor. At the heart of this rebirth are independent businesses that rely upon easy access for their customers and deliveries.

To date these changes have largely respected the historic character and scale of the corridor, and have preserved and reinforced the existing street pattern, all in keeping with recommendations in the City's adopted Downtown Plan. The combination of visually interesting historic buildings and nearby apartment rehabilitations has resulted in a thriving restaurant scene on Broad Street, fueled in no small part by the burgeoning residential development through the area.

We believe that a more successful path towards sustained economic development of the Broad Street corridor through downtown Richmond begins by reinforcing the existing historic street network and preserving historic buildings. A rich pedestrian experience along Broad Street, vehicular access (for both customers and deliveries), and available parking are all critical issues. To this end, we raise the following issues with the current design of the BRT system through Downtown Richmond:

- When the design team presented to CAR at the March meeting, no street cross-sections were provided to help us understand the new streetscapes. In a later public meeting on April 6, street cross-sections were included, both answering and raising questions about the design. Currently Broad Street has 10' wide lanes, and while new roads must be 11', existing roads may choose to keep the 10' widths. When we are trying to accommodate BRT, and de-emphasize the car in relation to other modes of transportation, why should we make the lanes wider? We recommend expanding only the dedicated bus lanes to 11', while keeping the lanes that are used exclusively for automobiles at 10'.
- In addition, the cross-sections show no accommodation for bicycle traffic. While it may be the City's intent to direct bicycles to other City streets, it is unwise to design them out of Broad Street completely. If the traffic lane widths were maintained at 10', there would be more room for bicycles.
- The design team has stated that there was extensive analysis of the impact of a BRT system on car traffic. If one of the intents of BRT is to bring new riders to public transportation, it follows

that car traffic would be reduced. However, the cross-sections appear to show that Broad Street will continue to have 2 lanes in each direction, plus turning lanes.

- From Cleveland Street to Adams Street the design calls for median-running buses. From Adams to Rockets Landing it calls for mixed traffic operations, which also means the buses will run along the curb, or in traffic with stops at sidewalks. Our original streetcar system ran down the middle of these streets. The medians on Broad Street are in that original path, a path which even the designers say is preferable for a new BRT system. Taking the buses from the median to the curb presents a number of troubling issues:
 - *Reduced parking*: Parking is already challenging in downtown. Reducing parking will only make it more difficult for people to conduct business on Broad Street.
 - *Removal of loading zones*: Businesses on Broad Street predominantly depend on curbside loading and unloading to replenish goods and supplies. GRTC should continue to work with the city to identify sufficient loading zones in close proximity to the businesses along the corridor to allow businesses to function efficiently. It is unclear how these businesses can continue to operate without these designated areas at the curb.
 - *Pedestrian experience*: Currently, the typical sidewalk is brick or concrete with street trees and signs lining the curb. The curbs themselves buffer parallel automobile parking. This “wall” of cars makes the pedestrian feel safe and secure, placing a barrier between them and the passing cars. By removing parking, and exposing pedestrians to busses passing within inches of the curb, it gives the perception of an unsafe pedestrian experience. If the pedestrians do not feel safe, they will not walk along Broad Street or patronize any businesses, especially the newly-popular outdoor dining locations along Broad Street.
 - *Impact upon the urban fabric*: If the three proposed downtown curb-running stations at 3rd/4th Street, 9th Street, and 12th Street were converted into median stations, the impact upon the historic urban fabric of Broad Street would be greatly reduced. Moving the stations to the median, where historically the trolley ran, would remove the additional construction from the curb which would allow parked cars to protect pedestrians, would allow better views of the historic buildings along Broad Street, and would retain the historic character of the sidewalk experience through the district.
- We understand that the new buses, the purchase of which has been contracted, have doors only on the right side. Thus, even under the median-running plan, two bus stations are necessary for each stop, doubling the cost of each station. Is it possible to purchase different buses which open on both sides? Alternately, is it possible for the buses to run against traffic (Eastbound in the North lane, Westbound in the South). Under this scenario, only one station would be necessary.

The City and local businesses have worked hard over the last several years to revitalize downtown, particularly Broad Street. There is now a lively restaurant, art, and design scene which is being threatened by the current transportation plan. The Commission of Architectural Review strongly supports the economic development of the Broad Street corridor through downtown Richmond, and recommends that development plans include adequate measures to identify and protect its significant historic and cultural resources. We believe that development in the Broad Street corridor can proceed in a way that protects its past while planning for robust economic development for future generations of Richmond residents.

Adopted by Commission of Architectural Review on July 28, 2015
Bryan Clark Green, Chair