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Adams forms plan to tame Burnside

Downtown - One-way traffic and a streetcar on Burnside and Couch could make the corridor less intimidating

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JOSEPH ROSE
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Commissioner Sam Adams has taken an old idea to improve traffic through downtown Portland -- turning Burnside and Couch into a couplet of one-way streets -- and added a river-crossing streetcar line.

Nearly five years after City Hall began talking about one-way options along the West Burnside Street corridor, Adams will unveil a \$39 million plan today that he says will vastly improve traffic and urban design in the city's core.

Traffic on Burnside would travel east, with westbound traffic diverted one block north to Northwest Couch Street from Second Avenue to 19th Avenue. Along the same stretch, Burnside would be shrunk to two lanes, with the other lanes converted to 240 parking spaces.

The streetcar line would follow the one-way streets before extending west five blocks to Northwest 24th Avenue and east across the Burnside Bridge to Northeast Sandy Boulevard.

Increasingly, City Hall sees Burnside Street as a barrier to drivers, pedestrians, bicyclists -- pretty much everyone trying to get around.

"This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to put the 'center' back in center city," Adams said, "and to bridge this divide between north and south."

But the project already has a small army of opponents.

Some Pearl District developers and residents have written to Adams, concerned that the plan would permanently damage the street environment.

Howard Shapiro, who lives in the Henry condominium tower in the Brewery Blocks, said diverting traffic onto Couch would move as many as 20,000 vehicles a day through an area that now has a tucked-in atmosphere of leisurely sidewalk dining and upscale shopping.

"It's an archaic and auto-focused solution that has been rejected in other cities," Shapiro said.

In Spokane, opponents note, the City Council is considering dismantling a 5-year-old couplet in the city center. Business owners have bemoaned a loss of business they attribute to lower traffic counts.

Downtown Portland, however, where traffic already flows on a series of interlinked one-way streets, isn't Spokane.

Barnes Ellis, a Henry resident who walks to work downtown, isn't convinced that Burnside needs fixing.

"This is a city," Ellis said, "and it's going to have busy streets."

It's not that simple, said Adams, the city's transportation commissioner.

For one thing, West Burnside is a nightmare for anyone trying to cross it on foot, he said. Five of the city's 10 most deadly intersections for pedestrians are on that street between Second Avenue and 19th Avenue.

A traffic analysis released earlier this year by consultant DKS Associates found that synchronized traffic lights and turn lanes on the proposed one-way streets would subtract about five minutes from the average westbound vehicle trip.

What's more, Adams says, the traffic lights, two-lane streets, increased parking and extended streetcar line would make the corridor easier to walk.

In 2002, the City Council approved the Burnside-Couch plan without the streetcar and continuing east of the Willamette River to East Burnside and 12th Avenue, only to decide later to re-examine the idea. At the time, the Planning Bureau urged the council to adopt less costly pedestrian enhancements along Burnside.

Urban design and traffic studies followed, with the plan Adams is pushing emerging as the preferred of 10 options.

With the streetcar in the mix, Adams' office thinks it can rally the financial assistance and political support needed to push the project forward.

"Even some who were reluctant before are now on board with the streetcar option," said Roland Chlapowski, Adams' chief transportation policy adviser. "It boosts the potential for development."

Michael Powell of Powell's City of Books and parking king Greg Goodman are among the plan's supporters.

The plan calls for the street

car line to extend west to Northwest 24th Avenue and east to Northeast 12th Avenue, where it would be in place to spark development along Sandy Boulevard to the Hollywood District.

Of course, there's the issue of money.

Adams said the \$39 million price tag is an early estimate based on a number of studies. The next step would be a one-year preliminary engineering study, which the City Council could approve as early as January. Adams thinks he has the council's support to take that step. The study would firm up the cost.

Paying for it, Adams said, would take a combination of sources, from developers paying through local improvement districts to federal grants to revenue from parking meters.

He said \$10 million from an existing urban renewal district already has been set aside.

A cost analysis by two independent consultants found that the city would save about \$1.5 million by making the street improvements and building the streetcar line simultaneously.

"It makes sense to do it now," Adams said.

Joseph Rose: 503-221-8029;