

# Input on the proposed renovations of the STA Plaza

STA Plaza Renovation  
Ad-hoc Committee

November 2014

Prepared for the Board of the Spokane Transit Authority





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To the Board of the Spokane Transit Authority:

The Boards of Downtown Spokane Partnership, Greater Spokane Incorporated and Visit Spokane wish to express their gratitude to the STA Board for granting the downtown Spokane business community the opportunity to reflect and provide input on proposed renovations to the STA Plaza.

Substantial concessions were made by the STA Board in order for this process to take place. The Boards took this gesture very seriously, spending a great deal of time and resources reviewing STA's plan before putting forth what are believed to be constructive recommendations supportive of STA's short and long term goals. The Boards fully recognize that the recommendations offered here are suggestions provided for the STA Board's final consideration.

Of the challenges identified by the Ad-hoc Committee, one is the impediments to communication that resulted in a late request for consideration which prompted the delay. The STA conducted several outreach efforts with every intention of garnering feedback from all stakeholders during the planning process. During our first meeting, with STA as our invited guest, it was recognized that our organizations should have engaged earlier, and that there were opportunities to gather final input from the community once draft final concepts were agreed upon by the STA Board. As a group, the Boards are committed to improving communication in the future, starting with the proposed formation of a Transportation Advisory Committee that we hope STA will look to engage on future projects.

All parties involved have the best of intentions to improve the experience at the plaza as well as the delivery of service to the downtown area. The STA is an indispensable partner of downtown business interests. Thank you for taking the time to review and consider the recommendations proposed within.

Respectfully,

Mark Richard  
Downtown Spokane Partnership

Steve Stevens  
Greater Spokane Incorporated

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Visit Spokane

# STA Plaza Renovation Ad-hoc Committee

November, 2014

## Committee Members:

Katy Bruya, Washington Trust Bank

Stacey Cowles, Cowles Company

Bryn West, River Park Square

Ezra Eckhardt, Umpqua Bank

Matt Jensen, Davenport Hotel Collection

Jan Quintrall, City of Spokane

Ron White, Unico Properties

Patrick McLaughlin, Wells Fargo

Mark Dailey, Integrus

Brendan Weichert, US Bank

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## Purpose

In response to requests submitted by downtown business and property interests, an ad hoc Committee was convened in accordance with an amended motion, passed by the Spokane Transit Authority (STA) Board in July, 2014, “to table the Phase II proposal and Phase I work for three months and have Greater Spokane Incorporated (GSI), Downtown Spokane Partnership (DSP), Visit Spokane, and STA meet to review and obtain additional public input.” The Board agreed, in the amendment, to accept DSP’s offer to lead the effort, to “have 4 organizations (GSI, DSP, Visit Spokane, STA) meet and come back to STA no later than November 15 with a recommendation.”

The Committee considered STA’s proposed renovations thoroughly, both in relation to the desires of an array of downtown business interests, law enforcement, and community service providers, and as a means to achieving STA’s stated objectives:

*To increase ridership with enhanced customer service, foster and enhance safety and security, improve functionality and efficiency of the plaza for transit customers and the Spokane community, reduce loitering opportunities/increase purposeful behavior, consider overall return on investment and overall community benefit, and ensure design and uses are complementary to adjacent properties.*

The following report is the culmination of five subsequent meetings of the STA Plaza Renovation Committee, and is intended to provide input to the STA Board from the combined perspective of downtown Spokane business interests. It is the hope of this body that its recommendations may contribute to achieving STA’s long-term goals more quickly, and its short-term goals more efficiently and effectively.

## Executive Summary

Through the course of Committee meetings and work, ten recommendations with additional strategies and tactics emerged, evolved, were refined and, finally, are presented in this report. The Committee suggests that all of these fold into an overarching recommendation: that STA consider reducing expenditures on the facility itself. This would be consistent with other transit models, and would enable STA to advance elements within its plan that appear poised to deliver quicker and higher returns on longer term goals. This would also exhibit circumspection toward investing in a facility worth much less than the investments made in the facility to date. In addition, should technology advancements or the advancement of other capital programs render a sizable indoor plaza functionally obsolete, or should these strategies not prove successful in accomplishing the stated objectives, it would prove wise to limit investments in the property itself.

Each of the recommendations has been taken from STA's existing plan and the Committee's recommendations and additional strategies and tactics are hoped to accelerate implementation of these strategies and their outcomes.

- The Committee recommends heightened priority for implementing "load-and-go" operations, Smart Bus technology, and satellite transfer stations in order to better serve customers, reduce the volume of buses on downtown city streets and improve the experience for the transit and non-transit pedestrian.
- The Committee supports modest expectations of retail services primarily to serve STA customers, and looks favorably on the construction of indoor waiting areas and pre-pay loading zones, if they can be designed with confidence that they will be used by the customer to warrant the investment.
- The Committee also recommends eliminating investment in non-transit-related elements of the proposal, such as any pre-built retail space, meeting spaces and other space for lease. The Committee believes that STA can more effectively achieve its outlined objectives by shelling in these spaces, right-sizing the access to the second floor and focusing investment, instead, on transit-related aspects of the proposal. This would serve to optimize bus service while reducing capital and maintenance costs, as well as reducing un-programmed space which may be misused by non-transit individuals. The Committee believes by taking this approach STA can more cost effectively achieve its short and long term goals.

The Committee received presentations by representatives from several community service and charity organizations, as well as community court, juvenile detention and law enforcement. These presentations were followed by extensive discussion and research that proved enlightening to the group. Several of the suggestions offered in this report result from those conversations, and Committee members are grateful for the agencies' and organizations' willingness to participate in this process. Some examples include the concept of clearly denoting behavior expectations at the facility, offering community employment information, and reviewing the plaza renovation with the Community Policing Through Environmental Design (or CPTED) principles in mind.

The Committee recognizes, as in most cities with a downtown transit facility, that there are social concerns which present themselves in the Plaza and need attention but are outside the scope of this report. Transit is certainly not the cause of these issues, nor is the Plaza the place to resolve them. The Committee members are committed to engaging, in another venue, in what should be a regional discussion about the quantity and quality of shelters and services to care for those in need.

In summary, the Committee found a great deal of concurrence with STA's proposal and its solutions posed to overcome challenges in the present design. The issues STA faces with a downtown transit facility are not unique to Spokane. Existing and proposed facilities throughout the nation are contending with challenges of enhancing services to their urban core while minimizing the amount of real estate occupied by idling buses, affording comfortable non-transit pedestrian flow on their sidewalks, and providing physical and social context that is most conducive to focusing on efficient delivery of services for transit customers—the primary reason a transit system exists. And, though other concepts shared in this report have been and are being tried, many concepts included the core elements reflected in STA's renovation plans. The Committee believes this is another instance demonstrating STA's strength and effectiveness as an organization.

## Process

The Committee met for approximately four hours on each of the following dates: September 10, September 19, October 3, October 17, and October 31. Dr. Mike Ingram of Whitworth University was hired to facilitate discussion, and Jeremy Canwell recorded minutes from each meeting. In addition to representatives from GSI, DSP, and Visit Spokane, regular attendees included representatives from downtown business interests, including: Cowles Company, The Davenport Hotel Collection, Umpqua Bank, US Bank, River Park Square, Kiemle & Hagood, Unico Properties, Wells Fargo, and Pyrotek, Inc. as well as the City of Spokane. Their commitment to this process represented some 400 person-hours of work.

The first meeting began with multimedia presentations by STA leadership and members of the project team. Thereafter, the Committee pursued discussion through several thought models as proposed by the facilitator. The initial conversations addressed the proposed renovations broadly, through such question as “Is \$4.7 million (Phase I) and \$1.3 million (Phase II) a good expenditure?” Concerns arising in these initial discussions focused on three distinct areas:

- Use of the real estate
- STA operations
- Non-purposeful and criminal activity in and around the Plaza

In order to more efficiently focus the discussion, and to benefit from sustained analysis from a variety of vantage points, the discussion evolved gradually: from organization around these three categories to debate in terms of what the group could agree to support. Subsequently, this support was gradually qualified to produce distinct Long-Term and Short-Term goals upon which the Committee could further agree.

In the interest of building consensus, some research was conducted to determine common best practices in the transit centers of comparable cities. These best practices included:

- Greatly reducing or removing idling buses from city streets
- Limiting interior space to that needed to serve transit customers
- Combining facilities with dense, mixed-use development
- Staging buses outside the downtown core, off the street, or underground
- Installing Smart Bus technology
- Utilizing open-air covered spaces and/or a modest waiting area for customers.

The Committee’s preliminary findings were reviewed before the Boards of GSI, DSP, and Visit Spokane, where they received unanimous support, minus abstentions, from those Board members with ties to the Plaza and/or STA. The executive committees from each Board also reviewed and approved the final draft of this report, and it reflects their input.



## Findings and Recommendations

The Committee agreed that the benefits of investing in **satellite depots** to better serve direct-route customers are worthwhile. These depots are the peripheral transfer stations STA is contemplating on the West Plains and near Spokane Community Colleges to provide more direct routing of customers not needing to come downtown to get to their destination. While this element would reduce the expenses associated with remodeling the Plaza to prepare for load-and-go operations, it will also reflect a better return on investment to both the transit system and its customers. Furthermore, it will reduce unnecessary trips through downtown, thereby reducing the presence of idling buses and facilitate load-and-go operations. The benefits of new satellite depots are clear, to the extent that the Committee supports accelerating the timeline for their implementation. This strategy represents a substantially lower capital cost option to systems throughout the nation that are building facilities that bring buses underground or within a structure, while achieving its objectives of enhancing its relationship with adjacent properties. Examples include Boise, Rochester NY. While increasing ridership, it was agreed that new satellite depots would vastly improve the functionality and efficiency of the Plaza, and the system overall, for transit customers.

The proposed **load-and-go** operations concept outlined in the STA plan was also met with unanimous support by the Committee. This strategy is reliant on increasing the frequency of buses and changes in operations that put staging outside of the downtown core and thus allow for boarding in a much quicker time frame at the Plaza. The advantages of this plan include improved air quality, reduced idle time, reduced pedestrian congestion arising from lengthy queuing and, therefore, improvement in complementary use with surrounding properties. This strategy will improve the experience for both the transit and non-transit pedestrian. Load-and-go operations would also reduce the volume of buses occupying downtown streets at any given time, enabling STA to reduce load zones to those immediately around the Plaza building. Due to the related enhancement to customer service, improved functionality and efficiency of the Plaza, and overall heightened return on investment to the transit system, its customers and the surrounding community, the Committee supports accelerating the timeline to implement load-and-go operations.

The Committee strongly supported implementing **Smart Bus technology**; with real-time arrival and departure information that allows the customer to see exactly when their bus will arrive. It was further agreed that this element was of a high priority and in need of acceleration insofar as it is a necessary part of load-and-go operations. It has also proven successful, in other systems, in bringing customers inside to a defined waiting area. The Committee recognizes its value to the overall service and its centrality to achieving STA's stated goals (particularly that of increasing ridership with enhanced customer information), however its prioritization should be based on its relevance to accomplishing other key system changes mentioned here.

The proposed creation of defined **prepaid loading stations** found strong support among the Committee. It was agreed that having established zones and prepay services would improve customer service while facilitating pedestrian passage on the sidewalks outside the Plaza. The Committee also agreed that while prepaid loading stations are a necessary element of the proposed load-and-go service, their design would be critical to ensuring safe loading and non-transit pedestrian passage. In addition, it was expressed that the facilities needed to be aesthetically attractive and designed in such a manner that ensures they are used as a means to define loading areas and create the non-transit pedestrian passage zone. The Committee therefore expressed that if best practices demonstrated prepaid loading stations' importance to facilitating other proposed improvements, and showed a high probability of use by customers, the stations would garner unanimous support of the Committee to be elevated in priority.

The Committee felt that the proposed defined **indoor waiting areas**, where customers could receive real time transit information while viewing the street, could both improve customer service and facilitate pedestrian passage along nearby sidewalks by attracting waiting transit riders out of the elements. It was further agreed that these indoor areas would make better use of the interior space than other options, provided they are sized appropriately to serve STA customers only and not accessible to non-transit riders. The Committee therefore supports the creation of indoor waiting areas, with the caveat that their design is critical to ensure that the space is of appropriate size, modest expense and designed to accommodate transit customers only.

By **reducing the amount of unused indoor space**, the Committee unanimously agreed that the downtown neighborhood and transit customer experience would improve by reducing non-purposeful indoor space. In addition, “phasing” unused indoor spaces by shelling it in much like one would see in a retail mall experience, would reduce speculative, or even unnecessary construction costs, as well as overhead expenses of maintaining, cleaning and securing the space in the Plaza. It was felt that best practice studies could derive the appropriate open space necessary in the design changes to serve STA customers and apply that formula to the Plaza. Many communities are reducing their interior footprint, and instead constructing outdoor covered waiting plazas to address use of transit stations as non-transit related respite centers, and as a means to enhance their customer experience, and improve how they interface with neighboring property owners and businesses. For instance, a new downtown facility in Indianapolis is proposed to have 5000 square feet of open space to serve up to 250 customers at any given time (currently 20,000 trips per day, but expected to grow significantly) and also includes several outdoor overhead covered loading stations. In adopting this strategy, the Committee recognizes that this might reduce non-transit related loitering and may compel those in genuine need of shelter to seek it elsewhere. These concerns are a phenomenon of urban socioeconomic struggles throughout the world. The Committee members are committed to engage in a regional discussion about the availability of adequate shelter in a different venue.

The Committee unanimously supported **moving customer service and security to the first floor**. The Committee believed strongly that this would make far better use of main-floor space. Meanwhile, it would enhance customer service while improving the safety of customers, as well as reduce overhead by locating security closer to the customer. More broadly, moving these elements to the first floor would contribute to effectively separating the second floor for other purposes.

The proposal to **enhance security staffing** found unanimous support. The Committee agreed with the STA study, which deemed enhanced security instrumental to the remodel. It was agreed that enhanced security staffing was necessary to optimize the experience of the Plaza, not just for riders, but for non-transit pedestrians and downtown citizens alike, by fostering and enhancing safety and security. Most facilities are locating their security on the main floor and some are co locating with law enforcement to improve the sense of safety for customers.

The Committee further agreed to support the proposal to **reprogram the second floor** of the Plaza, with several caveats. As there are already some 470,000 square feet of conference space in the downtown area, the Committee questioned the demand for a conference center/meeting area, and discussed what appeared to be a lack of market research to quantify the supply and demand of conference space in downtown. Concern was also expressed over the propriety of additional space, created with public funds, competing with private for profit entities. The Committee felt unanimously that the conference and open space should be removed from the plan, driving significant reductions in the cost of the project. Lastly, as the escalator entails considerable operating and maintenance costs, it is also understood it may be nearing the end of its useful life. Through considerable research and a great deal of expertise provided by real estate experts, the Committee concluded that the escalator should be removed. These findings resulted from consensus on

the need to enclose the second floor unused space until a more mature market reveals a viable use (demand). By relying on the two fire code stairs, a skywalk system and two elevators, the facility would retain greater access than most any property of its size, sufficient to serve access for any subsequent commercial enterprise that develops in the space. This strategy would, when combined with “phasing” these otherwise unused areas on the second floor, would significantly reduce non-transit related activity in the building. These results again would serve to improve the Plaza’s complement to adjacent properties, increase the return on investment, reduce loitering opportunities and foster greater security in and around the property. Cost savings could then be applied to other priority capital needs. In conversations with select STA Board members concern was expressed that adding the escalator later would represent a significant challenge to the operations given that it is designed immediately overhead of the customer service center. It was the professional opinion of the Committee that demand would never require the install of an escalator, given other access points, but that STA could, if it chose to, simply frame in for the escalator and not expend the funds for moving or replacing the existing escalator until a tenant demand called for it. It was also noted that the escalator was removed from the Sherwood building and now relies on elevator and stairs to access the skywalk.

Through substantial debate, the Committee resolved to support a **modest expansion of retail on the main floor to serve STA customers**. This includes the plan of moving existing 2<sup>nd</sup>-floor retail to the first floor. In the absence of a retailer, the Committee supported “shelling-in” planned retail space with attractive pad fronts, with the understanding that the focus of any retail, should be solely to serve the STA customer and not the surrounding area. Doing so was not deemed as highly probable nor the best use of public funds. While reducing overhead costs, this modest approach to expansion would reduce expectation, as well as competition and risky speculative investment.

## Additional Strategies and Tactics

In addition to the items of support described above, the Committee identified several new strategies and tactics that it hopes will be useful to the STA Board in its efforts to achieve the goals of the remodel. In particular, extensive discussion followed presentations to the second meeting attended by stakeholder guests from Community Court, Juvenile Justice, Spokane Police Department, Catholic Charities, Frontier Behavioral Health, The Homeless Coalition, Crosswalk and STA passengers. Having reviewed the STA remodel proposal, these guests were asked, “How do you think this STA remodel proposal would affect the Plaza and the people you represent”?

Based on these presentations and ensuing discussions, it was agreed that negative behaviors, criminal activity and non-transit activities occurring in the Plaza today have root causes in broader social problems. Here we are speaking of unemployment, under-employment, and under-education among a population with high incidence of homelessness, mental illness and substance abuse.

The STA Plaza is neither the cause of, nor the occasion for solving these problems. However, the Committee is committed to being part of a regional conversation to address these issues in a different venue. And whereas the Committee found these social problems to be beyond the scope of STA and the proposed remodel, it concluded that several additions to the proposed remodel should be considered.

The Committee recommends that STA **explore its policy on trespassing**, to provide incentives or alternatives that might allow people back onto buses to access services, work, etc. At the same time, STA might minimize the appearance of loitering by **establishing a clearly designated sidewalk pedestrian passage area**, as well as exploring the location of an **SPD precinct inside the Plaza** itself. Further progress might be made, the Committee felt, by exploring legislation to expand the commissions of its staff to allow **STA to provide security in the blocks surrounding the Plaza because existing jurisdictional boundaries can prevent the pursuit of positive strategies and measures**. In addition, the Committee recommends that STA give **SPD an opportunity to provide input concerning one of their key principles: CPTED (Community Policing Through Environmental Design)**. The Committee, meanwhile, encourages STA to request that the City proceed with its strategy of enhancing police staffing downtown.

The Committee would also like to see STA mount a **“courtesy campaign” and clearly and simply sign the facility as a way to inform Plaza users of purposeful behavior**. And, with an eye toward supporting a vibrant downtown, the Committee hopes that STA will consider **locating some form of employment services inside the Plaza**. Another concept brought forward was to use un-programmed space to **create a defined student or bus pass zone on the main floor**, accessible only with student ID or a bus pass where one could access free Wi-Fi, study seating and perhaps a coffee and/or juice bar.

Finally, The **Committee proposes to assemble a transportation advisory council** to provide STA with input on transit related matters in the future. One such topic is the Committee’s desire to participate with STA in a long-range planning process on what the future holds for this particular property, should the implementation of these strategies prove unsuccessful, or should modes, technology or customer needs deem the use of the property is in need of reconsideration.

## Conclusions

In summary, the Committee respectfully recommends that STA limit its financial investment in remodeling the plaza itself, and concentrate instead on executing long-range strategies of the renovation plan; elements that have a higher likelihood of achieving the objectives set forth by the STA Board in September of 2012, of increasing ridership, enhancing customer service, enhancing safety, improving functionality and efficiency of the plaza, reducing loitering, improving return on investment and enhancing its complement to adjacent properties.

By moving key components up in priority, such as load-and-go operations, prepaid loading areas, smart bus technology and the construction of peripheral transfer stations, together with shrinking down unused space only to that needed to serve transit customers well, STA will deploy best practices to reduce the number and duration of idling buses in the downtown core, and mitigating unintended adverse conditions such as the visual impairment brought about by walls of buses, unpassable sidewalks due to unmanaged lines, and congregation of negative non-transit related activity exacerbated by unintentional public space. This approach will also reduce the risk to STA of further investment into a facility should trends or conditions change.

The Committee recognizes some of these strategies require more capital and or operating revenue, but were unable to quantify either due to time and resource constraints. However, the Committee stands ready to discuss these and other STA priorities and partner with STA to accomplish them.

## Resources

- STA staff
  - STA staff and Board members participated in an extremely informative work session
  - STA staff contributed a great deal of time responding with great detail to questions and requests for information
- Stakeholder's session

The Committee learned a great deal from engaging in a work session with key stakeholders representing youth, the homeless and individuals suffering from mental illness, community court, juvenile detention services and law enforcement
- City staff assisted in researching transit systems and traffic counts as well as providing extensive time engaging in each work session
- Spokesman Review article; "Fast facts about STA riders, plaza" –Shawn Vestal
- Research regarding available conference space provided by Visit Spokane
- Comparable cities
  - Information was gathered regarding transit systems of both recent and proposed downtown transit centers as well as GSI's benchmark comparable cities.
  - Conference call with executive staff of Indygo (Indianapolis Public Transportation Corp., re: their proposed downtown transit center)

(NOTE: Comparable cities and new/recent downtown transit systems reviewed included Portland Transit Mall, Denver Union Station, Albuquerque Alvarado Transportation Center, Boise's proposed Downtown multi-modal Center, Tulsa's Denver Avenue Station and Memorial mid-town station, Indygo proposed downtown transit center, Rochester NY transit center.)

- Diverse background of ad hoc Committee members that represented ridership, banking, insurance, development, property management, corporate leadership real estate, and hotel management as well as leadership from GSI, Visit Spokane and Downtown Spokane Partnership