

# Moving transit center needs more discussion



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ANCHORAGE BUSINESS

After the People Mover bus transit center has spent four decades in the heart of downtown, the Municipality of Anchorage is proposing to relocate it to a more centralized location in Midtown. The logistical benefits for riders and the cost benefits to the municipality are easy to see, but the effects on downtown and Midtown businesses are not well understood.

The bus system is a criti-

*See Page B-2, HALCRO*

# HALCRO: Bus center move

*Continued from B-1*

cal transportation link for the Anchorage economy. Studies have shown that 27 percent of Anchorage households do not own a vehicle. Every year, almost 4 million passengers use the public transportation system, which provides an affordable means for employees and families to traverse the community. In addition, People Mover carried 45,000 bikes last year, allowing riders greater freedom once they arrived at their destinations.

The economic reasons for moving the transit center are solid. Currently the People Mover runs 14 routes through the municipality, 13 of which pass through downtown. Forty years ago, downtown was a sensible choice. Today, with the significant retail and population growth south of Tudor Road, Midtown Anchorage has become the most logical place for a transportation hub. A more centrally located facility will improve connections between routes, allow cost savings on fuel and provide more timely access to businesses, professional services and the library.

However, while the proposed move makes sense for the municipality and riders, there are legitimate concerns from businesses on both ends of the move.

In the 1970s, as commercial growth was beginning to take hold in Midtown, Mark Korting was a young real estate salesman. "When I got my real estate license, they were filling in Blueberry Lake to build the Carrs grocery store," Korting recalled. Over the ensuing years, he has seen tremendous growth in Midtown, including the recent construction of his own gleaming Remax/Dynamic headquarters on A Street.

Because most of the large parcels in Midtown have been developed, the exact placement of the bus transit center is a mystery to business owners in the area. While the specific parcel hasn't been identified, the municipality has asked the Legislature for \$8.2 million for site selection, land acquisition, design and construction. Business owners feel the process is moving too fast and without a real community conversation. Concerns about an influx of transients in Midtown, at a time when more public safety issues are emerging in the area, are a legitimate concern.

In downtown, business owners also have concerns. Many worry that access to downtown will be reduced by the departure of the transit center on Sixth Avenue. Right now, a steady stream of passengers disembark downtown to shop, eat and enjoy civic activities. With the cost pressure of building a new transit center, and a history of budget cuts that reduce bus routes, downtown merchants worry about not being the anchor of Anchorage's public transit system.

In addition, they point to the fact that the Anchorage Downtown Comprehen-

sive Plan recommends that the municipality undertake a Transit Center Relocation Feasibility Study to determine the best location within downtown, which has not been done. The original comprehensive plan specifically recommended a Third Avenue location to leverage proximity to the Alaska Railroad Depot and the potential for commuter rail service. The transit proposal comes at a time when downtown merchants are already feeling that their voices are not being heard.

A consistent challenge for the private sector is government agencies acting unilaterally on major decisions without talking to stakeholders. If the bus transit center moves to Midtown, it will make a 40-year footprint on the area. While the idea of moving the bus transit center has merit, fairness demands that both Midtown and downtown business and property owners have an opportunity to fully understand the economic consequences.

If designed and planned properly, with the collaboration of local business owners and a clear vision from the city, the relocation of the transit center can be a benefit to Anchorage.

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