

All aboard

Will a transit center take Springfield where it wants to go?

DYSPEPSIANA | James Krohe Jr.



I suppose the question to the Springfield City Council ought to be phrased this way: If they come, will you build it? "It" is a multimodal transit center, a nice plan for which was unveiled in February by Downtown Springfield, Inc. and the Springfield-Sangamon County Regional Planning Commission [See the Feb. 23 *IT* cover story, "Trains, buses and stores: A 10th Street transportation center could bring Springfield together," by Neil Schneider.] It's a concept drawing, not a blueprint, but if built the center would occupy the half-block between 9th and the 10th Street tracks and Washington and Jefferson streets – if, that is, passenger trains eventually trundle up and down the 10th Street tracks rather than along Third Street.

Springfield's transit center would be a central interchange point where buses serving city, charter and intercity routes, airport, downtown and tourist shuttles, taxis and rental cars, bicycles and, of course, Amtrak passenger trains would meet and mingle, thus linking the many parts of the city's transport system into a more efficient whole.

Makes sense. Make public transit more convenient and you make it more popular. What is widely reckoned to have been Illinois' first gen-

uine transit center outside Chicago is in downtown Champaign, at the downtown Illinois Terminal, which opened in 1999. There travelers arriving by city bus or taxi can board Amtrak trains to Chicago, St. Louis or Indianapolis as well as intercity buses, including the massively popular Megabus. Two to three thousand travelers are said to pass every weekday through Illinois Terminal.

Does that sort of future await Springfield? A multimodal transit center will be used only to the extent there is demand for intermodal trips. University towns like Bloomington-Normal (which is building its own transit center) and Champaign-Urbana have large populations of students who are relatively poor, who make several trips out of town every year and who do not own their own cars. It is no accident that the number of people passing through Illinois Terminal is often higher on weekends than during the work week, which is the reverse of the usual pattern.

Nor is it an accident that travelers in C-U can connect to a more evolved city bus system than Springfield's, one that offers Sunday service and five of whose lines run later than 3 a.m. during the academic year. In contrast, UIS stu-

dents are fewer, SMTD offers no connecting service to campus on Sundays when most return from trips, and only hourly service other days. Car ownership among students is high, thanks to university policies that encourage it, such as free parking and a campus conveniently and stupidly located just off the interstate.

Larger hopes than increasing transit use ride on the transportation center. It is assumed to have happy effects on tourism and downtown development. The first is a topic that must await a future column. As for development, increasing transit access does indeed tend to push up the value of adjacent properties. That's why property owners along new streetcar lines in Portland, Ore., not only agreed to but were eager to pay a special assessment that largely funded its construction.

That's also why every burg from Punxsutawney to Puget Sound is building a transit center. "When you pull together your transportation in a city in a single location," explained DSI executive director Victoria Ringer, "the entire area around it benefits from development." That's certainly what happens in big cities. Most travelers from Springfield do not usually think of it in these terms, but Chicago's Union Station is not merely a train station but a transit center. There converge taxis, CTA buses, out-of-town chartered coaches and commuter and interstate trains run by Amtrak. On an average weekday, almost 120,000 passengers pass through it.

The presence of Union Station was not the reason that Sears decided to build its iconic skyscraper in the 1970s, but it was why it decided it build its skyscraper a bit more than a block from Union Station. Nearby run several el lines on which its army of workers move in and out of the Loop, and Union Station itself is where trains from the west – including the suburb of Burr Ridge where most of Sears' then-top execs lived – terminate.

Transit spurs development only, however, if the people transit brings into a neighborhood are potential shoppers, workers or residents. Transit riders in the capital city are mostly high school and middle school kids or the poor. Unlike Chicago's, Springfield's working population is not transit-dependent and are unlikely to switch, barring a catastrophic increase in gasoline prices, thanks to aldermen who do everything to make life easy for automobile users but valet park their cars.

A well-designed, clean and safe central interchange facility can push ridership of underused systems a little closer to optimum even in Springfield. Bus-to-the-door service to Amtrak, for instance, might boost both bus and train ridership. So even if a transit center won't transform either downtown or public transit in Springfield, it would still start a trip in the right direction. □

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Editor's note

Nobody doubts that \$8 million in budget cutbacks at Springfield public schools will hurt the quality of education offered here. The dire fiscal news follows our reporting last week that student test scores in District 186 are already dismal and not improving. As the city schools deteriorate, those who can are continuing to move to the bedroom communities of Chatham, Sherman, Rochester, Riverton and other towns, where schools are growing and some are thriving. The flight to the edges is damaging the core, and thousands of children are being left behind. —Fletcher Farrar, editor