

Technical Assistance Panel – Northloop Highway, Kansas City, Missouri

Executive Summary

In 2014, conversations among Kansas City leadership, sparked by Missouri Constitutional Amendment 7 and the rebuilding of the Broadway Bridge, opened the door to further discussions of decommissioning Northloop, the section of interstate highway in downtown Kansas City, Missouri, bound by Broadway Boulevard, Charlotte Street, Independence Avenue, and 6th Street.

Contemplating the highway decommissioning, City leadership and the Mid America Regional Council turned to the Urban Land Institute – ULI Kansas City for assistance with the following question:

What land uses/development should be recommended should Northloop be decommissioned and the Northloop land become available for redevelopment?

ULI, through its Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) program, assembled a team of member experts to study the area, interview stakeholders, and ultimately make a land use recommendation.

The ULI TAP process, a two-day intensive program, provided the panel with a site tour, current and historic planning documentation, and personal interviews with a range of city leadership, planners, business owners, stakeholders, and real estate developers. Through the process, panelists further defined the challenges inherent in the City's charge, uncovered additional information about the site, and identified several key themes, including: reconnecting the historic street grid; connecting streets once cut off by the construction of Northloop; improving pedestrian access; and adding additional open space and/or parks to the area.

Additional observations included:

- The Northloop study area covers 32 acres and slices through downtown, disconnecting the street grid and separating the Central Business District from River Market, Columbus Park, and the Missouri River.
- Traffic counts along Northloop average 70,000 cars/day and the frequency of on/off ramps along this stretch of interstate leads to frequent accidents and subsequent traffic congestion.
- Other east-west thoroughfares will need to be improved and/or widened to accommodate increased traffic should Northloop be decommissioned, and thus an environmental impact study is needed prior to a final development decision.
- The Broadway Bridge needs to be rebuilt and, in so doing, tie into the street grid more effectively.
- The Heart of America Bridge divides the River Market and Columbus Park neighborhoods. The division is exacerbated by the ramp infrastructure on the southern end of the bridge, which should be brought back down to grade.
- As Northloop falls within the boundaries of Downtown Kansas City, the goals of the Greater Downtown Area Plan should be supported by the panel's recommendations.

Development Options

With a number of critical assumptions in hand (e.g. the highway will be decommissioned, no land acquisition costs to the City, etc.), four primary development options emerged:

1. **Back to Nature.** Given the wide expanse of potential vacant land at the site, the panel considered preserving the area as park space. While this may be the most economical short-term solution, without the ability to sell the land or generate tax revenue from new development, permanent open space is a weaker economic development solution and misses an opportunity for a transformative development.
2. **Take Me Out to the Ballgame.** A number of stakeholders noted that a downtown baseball stadium would be a welcome addition to the downtown skyline. The configuration of site, however, is quite linear and is not suitable for a modern-day stadium.
3. **Big Bang.** A "Big Bang" development option proposes that the City prepare and hold the site until an opportunity arises to sell the entire site to one large corporate or institutional user. Phasing and implementing this development plan would include the following key elements:
 - Preparing the site for development;
 - Restoring the grid elements early in the process;
 - Potentially adopting an interim use;

- Providing for ongoing maintenance of the site; and
 - Marketing the site and issuing requests proposals on a national scale.
4. **Evolution.** The panel also identified an "Evolutionary" development option whereby the City prepares the site and allows development to evolve incrementally, as the market dictates. Phasing and implementation here would take into account the following elements:
- Issuing multiple requests for proposals for the site;
 - Prioritizing parcel phasing, creating momentum and natural follow-on development;
 - Establishing planning controls early;
 - Conducting initial site preparation and providing ongoing maintenance; and
 - Establishing a financial framework to provide guidance and reduce delays as development occurs.

Design Considerations

The panel envisioned a master plan framework, adaptable to both an Evolutionary or Big Bang approach and functional with the sectioning of the site by the reconnected street grid. Key design recommendations included:

- Varying the massing of the buildings;
- Embracing smaller open spaces and pocket parks; and
- Placing two or three levels of below-grade parking in the excavated roadbed.

By following these design guidelines, the City encourages development that delivers on the themes of reconnecting the downtown neighborhoods and creating a more functional transition between the CBD and River Market.

Financing

Funding from the City or Missouri Department of Transportation to decommission the interstate is unavailable, yet funds are available for an environmental impact study, which will be needed prior to any development decision.

Financing for a development of this scale could utilize private or public financing. With private financing, the panel assumed that a developer would pay an estimated 75 dollars per square foot for the land, and a combination of mortgage financing and equity would pay for the development. Separately, the panel considered a public financing option, which would involve nominal carrying costs for the property while it remains under public ownership, and a TIF to pay for differential costs related to any necessary infrastructure.

Recommendations

Decommissioning Northloop represents a significant shift in the City's approach to development – embracing an opportunity to restore a significant portion of the downtown street grid, making the environment more pedestrian and bicycle-friendly, and supporting investments in the streetcar by providing opportunities for transit-oriented development.

Prior to the launch of any work, the City is encouraged to examine all development elements and identify which role(s) it wants or is able to play – with this defined role, the City will be better equipped to embark on a successful and sustainable development. The speed with which the site is developed and the related potential holding costs associated with slow absorption rates should also be considered. Lastly, the City is encouraged to pursue development of certain common elements found in each development option, and, once the site is shovel-ready, take time to evaluate the market again as shifts in demand may have occurred.

To the greatest extent possible, the panel recommends the City embrace a development approach to the Northloop site that simultaneously preserves alternatives for one large user *and* an evolution of smaller uses over time. This dual approach provides the City with the greatest degree of development flexibility and the strongest opportunity for long-term success.