

Crain's Detroit Business

November 12, 2007

A step in transit

Troy could become regional center for buses, light rail

By [Daniel Duggan](#)

High hopes surround a plan for a \$3 million transit center in Troy that is expected to spur walkable development and connect the sprawling suburb to Detroit and other communities.

Regional planners say the center, near the edge of Birmingham, could act like a regional transit point as the area's struggling transportation system develops around it.

Whether it's the first step toward mass transit in the Motor City or part of the growing Troy-Birmingham rail district, it's moving in the right direction, said Richard Blouse, president and CEO of the **Detroit Regional Chamber**.

"If we want to stop the talent-job drain and preserve the knowledge-based jobs here, we have to create a different quality of life," he said at a two-day real estate conference in Troy last week. "Mass transit is a very important piece for an economic transformation."

The center was part of a transit strategy presented at the conference by the **University of Michigan** and the **Urban Land Institute**. *Crain's* was an event sponsor.

Plans for a transit center originated with the retail development Midtown Crossings, at Maple and Coolidge, by **Grand Sakwa Properties L.L.C.** As part of the project, the company agreed to give the city of Troy 3 acres of land to use for the center.

Troy is overseeing the project, with funding to be provided by the **Michigan Department of Transportation**. The New York architectural firm **Wendel Duchscherer** has been retained, but a design concept is not expected for another year.

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The structure would be built along the **Amtrak** railroad line south of Maple Road and west of Coolidge Highway, behind Midtown Crossings.

Under terms of the Grand Sakwa agreement, the center must be built by 2010 or the land reverts to the company.

The transit center could include a commuter rail to Detroit, planners say. It also could be used as a hub for existing bus routes and possibly a streetcar or light-rail system to move people from downtown Birmingham to the proposed Pavilions of Troy development at Big Beaver and Coolidge, and then to Somerset Collection.

Transportation dovetails with the city of Troy's plans for a revived Big Beaver corridor that includes more mixed-use developments involving retail, office and residential along a six-mile stretch.

Detroit is far behind other cities in its mass transit, said Christopher Leinberger, a UM professor and development consultant who led a study of the Troy Transit Center and presented it last week.

"You might think Detroiters won't leave their cars; that they say, 'You have to rip my dead fingers from the steering wheel when I'm dead,' " he said. "But walkable developments have been built in a lot of other cities in the last 20 years."

Leinberger pointed to economic incentives for the private sector as well, citing a 40 percent to 200 percent premium on investment in real estate near mass transit.

The plans already are spurring development in the area. Linden Nelson, CEO of **Celebration Centers of America**, is planning a retail and office development on 17 acres next to the transit center area, with the idea of building residential components in future phases.

He acquired the land 15 years ago as part of the now-defunct business he owned, **Ha-Lo Creative Concepts in Marketing**.

"We have three or four letters of intent (from retailers) right now, and that has a lot to do with the transit center," he said during the Urban Land Institute conference.

Challenges still loom, said John Hertel, CEO of **Detroit Regional Mass Transit**, who is working to find a political compromise between the city of Detroit and Oakland, Wayne and Macomb counties.

In the past 50 years, 30 plans have been proposed for mass transportation in the Detroit area, he said. Every time, the same problems arise.

"There's a real short list of why not to do this, and it turns out to be the cost," he said. "Who pays for it? That's the question that comes up."

If the area's private sector and governmental leadership can't find common ground, it will lose a golden opportunity, Hertel said.

"What's going on here is a challenge of what will keep our children here, what will keep us here and what will keep our businesses here," he said.

