

Fewer lanes, no bike lanes & parking on Front & Myrtle? Consultant plan is just the start

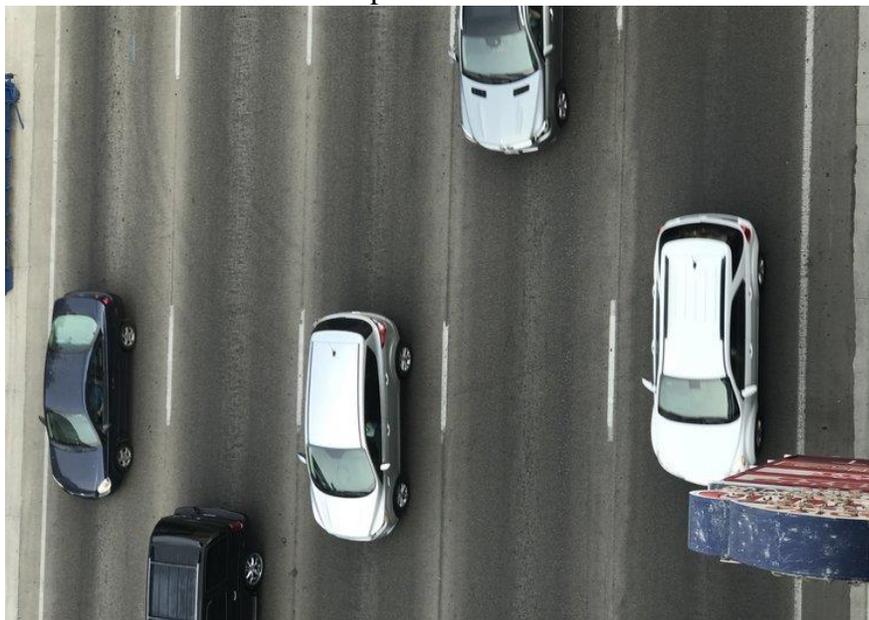
November 28, 2017/ By Don Day

Front Street & Myrtle Street run through the heart of Boise - part of a highway and freeway system that move cars into, out of and through Downtown. But the roads present a literal barrier to those on foot - serving as a major dividing line in the Capitol City's heart.

Changes could be coming to those streets, but a consultant's ideas may be a tough sell.

BoiseDev was the [first to report on the project to develop a set of plans](#) to make Front St. and Myrtle St. as they run through Downtown more than just freeway offshoots. Now, for the first time, the plan is revealed here to the public.

Sam Schwartz Consulting has turned in its [Front and Myrtle Alternatives Analysis](#) - which lays out the current situation and potential future of the two roads.



FRONT STREET FROM ABOVE. DON DAY/BOISEDEV.COM

Front and Myrtle form a couplet - flowing off the Interstate-184 freeway and ending at Broadway Avenue. The streets were a vital part of the early-90s era Broadway-Chinden Connector which remade east-west transit through the city core. That project put a "freeway to freeway" connection right through Downtown Boise.

Each of the streets is controlled by the Idaho Transportation Department as state highways, and as such are not under the purview of the Capital City Development Corporation or City of Boise, or even the county-wide Ada County Highway District.

As we reported last year, the CCDC/City of Boise group went back and forth extensively with ITD over how the Alternatives Analysis, with the City and CCDC wanting an emphasis on “shift(ing) in focus away from moving cars with minimal delay,” while ITD lobbied for language that didn’t inconvenience auto drivers.

The analysis



COVER PAGE OF THE FRONT & MYRTLE ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS

The Schwartz team found that Front and Myrtle sliced through the Downtown street grid, and as “auto-centric” roads, they acted as a “physical and psychological barrier... for those walking and biking.”

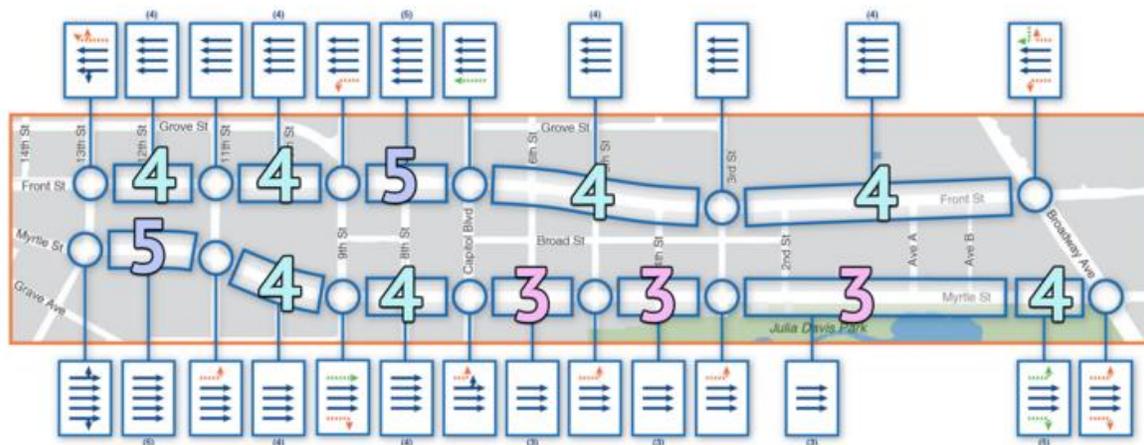
Cars are currently allowed to go 35 MPH along the streets - typical for many surface roads, but outside the norm for the rest of the downtown street grid which features a 25 MPH limit. Each road has five lanes - which when combined with high speeds can mean crossing north-to-south while on foot can mean long frustrating waits.

The Alternatives Analysis found that the roads actually have a surplus of capacity for cars - and suggests that it could be put to use to make the roads more friendly for those using bikes and their feet without causing major harm to drivers.

“(The) preferred alternative generally prioritizes strategies that reduce excess roadway capacity and vehicle speeds, aims to improve safety for all street users, and reduces north-south crossing distances,” the report notes.

Fewer lanes

Lane Configurations



The above diagram provides a conceptual look at the various lane configurations including dedicated turn lanes and lane drops as envisioned in the preferred alternative. Arrows in green indicate lane additions and those in red indicate lane drops.

The consulting team suggested cutting the roads from five lanes to three in spots - but mixing in segments that are four and five lanes as well - depending on the needs for each block.

Front St. would be cut from five lanes to four between Broadway & Capitol Blvd. It would jump back up to the current five lanes in the heart of downtown from Capitol to 9th St., then go back to four lanes from 9th until the mouth of the Connector at 13th St.

On Myrtle, five lanes would stay in place from the end of the Connector and 11th St. Then it would drop to four lanes until Capitol. Then, the current five-lane road would three lanes all the way to Broadway - though some turn lanes would be mixed in on this stretch.

Schwartz's team says traffic on the two streets will continue to worsen over time even if nothing is done - but concluded "the differences in traffic operational impacts between the future 'no-build' scenario and the preferred alternative designs are modest compared to the benefits provided. "

Vince Trimboli, Idaho Transportation Department Public Affairs Manager said that concept will be a difficult one.

"The Connector coming in and out of town is a freeway to freeway connection," he said. "The three middle lanes move traffic through, the outer two lanes get people on and off."

By cutting down to three lanes in even a portion of the road - it could cause problems.

"If you... squeeze your traffic down to one lane essentially, you could potentially create safety and mobility concerns by just backing traffic up," Trimboli said.

While the Alternatives Analysis primarily focused on the roads as they exist as part of Downtown Boise, Trimboli said many users have to be considered for a portion of the state highway network.

“We want to make sure we take a more balanced or wholistic approach - that is the best for the City of Boise, for their pedestrians, (and) people all over the Valley and around the state.”

The City of Boise did not respond to requests for comment.

Bike lanes? No. Parking? Yes.

Taking out lanes would free up room for other uses - but in what will come as a surprise to some, one of those suggestions isn't new or expanded bike lanes.

“Bicycle facilities were generally not favored by the project team, as parallel facilities along Main and Idaho are currently under consideration,” the report said.

Bike lanes on Main and Idaho have been hotly contested and were even briefly installed - but for now, remain absent on these adjacent streets.

Instead, extra wide sidewalks and car parking would be slotted in along the the two highway roads.



SAM SCHWARTZ CONSULTING GRAPHIC. CLICK TO ENLARGE

For instance, at Capitol and Myrtle, the Alternatives Analysis suggests removing the existing shoulders (which are used by some as bike lanes) and extending the sidewalks. Near Trader Joe's, where a lane is suggested to be removed, the sidewalk would be vastly expanded at the corner with a place for bike parking - and a row of new on-street parking for cars.

On the three-lane stretch of Myrtle St. that runs near Julia Davis Park, two lanes could be removed, and replaced with tree-lined sidewalks as well as parking for both cars and bikes.

Get this crosswalk party started

NEW SIGNALIZED INTERSECTIONS + MARKED PEDESTRIAN CROSSWALKS



SAM SCHWARTZ CONSULTING GRAPHIC.

Four new stoplights and three additional crosswalk legs could be added on the couplet if the suggested plan were to be fully adopted.

On Myrtle Street, stoplights and pedestrian crossings are suggested at both 5th Street and Avenue A.

In the case of Avenue A, adding crosswalks here would cut down the nearly half-a-mile stretch between 3rd Street and Broadway that provides no way for bikes or those on foot to cross Myrtle. A new light at 5th Street would help connect downtown to a new pedestrian path that links to Julia Davis Park.

For Front St., new stoplights could be added at 10th Street and 12th Street. The 10th Street light would give pedestrians easier access to JUMP and the Simplot headquarters.

New west side crosswalk “legs” could be added to existing crossings at Ave. A, 2nd Street and Capitol Blvd. Right now those intersections only have crosswalks on the east side due to turning traffic and potential conflicts.

ALSO READ:

[ITD, CCDC collaborate to make changes to Front, Myrtle](#)

Slower speeds?

The report didn't specifically make a recommendation about what to do about the 35 MPH speed limit.

It did include a page about “Other ITD facilities” and noted that both Highway 26 in Downtown Idaho Falls and The I-84 business loop in Caldwell have speed limits of 25 MPH in urban environments.

“Neither of these examples are analogous to Front and Myrtle, but are instead offered to provide context for the potential for lower speeds,” report writers noted.

A CCDC official told me last year that reducing the speed from its current 35 MPH posting would have several impacts the agency viewed as positive - including reducing the amount of time it takes cars to speed up and slow down, and making the streets quieter and calmer in general.



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ITD has held to the 35 MPH limit.

The conflict is noted in the report's opening pages.

“Front and Myrtle’s primary role as a major east-west facility to move traffic can’t be overlooked, especially with the rise of Meridian as key destination in the west metro area, and strong residential growth in southeast Boise.”

Trimboli says comparing Front & Myrtle to the roads in other roads isn't a complete comparison.

"It's an apples to oranges comparison because it's a freeway-freeway connection. I-84 back to I-84 via Broadway," he said.

Schwartz suggests looking at signal timing along Front Street during peak rush hour. Right now, vehicles are given 140 seconds for each green cycle in rush hour periods - which means people on foot, bike or car who want to get across Front wait nearly two minutes. The reports says

cutting the cycle length time to 90 or 100 seconds could have small impacts to traffic on Front - but concedes that signal timing on Front and Myrtle are all tied into the wider timing of streets across downtown, which the report writers acknowledge is beyond the scope of their report.

Up and over? Over and out



A PEDESTRIAN WALKWAY LIKE THE ONE SOON TO BE CONSTRUCTED OVER AVE. B BY ST. LUKE'S HEALTH SYSTEM ISN'T SUGGEST FOR FRONT OR MYRTLE.

Last fall when BoiseDev first broke word of this process, the headline included the phrase “visions of tunnels & skybridges” - based upon reporting from stakeholders who wanted to see “big picture” ideas for Front and Myrtle in the future.

But the report bats down these ideas.

In essence, Schwartz's team argues that putting the road in a tunnel or building a skybridge over the top causes many problems.

Even though a skybridge gets people on foot and bike up and over the cars, they make “inconvenient diversions.” To access a skybridge, you often have to take a ramp, elevator or stairs - instead of just crossing the street a normal crosswalk.

For tunnels, they can be “potentially unpleasant.” If you’ve ever been in a car tunnel, they aren’t exactly a place you want to spend much time.

And lastly - either option is expensive.

“Bridges and tunnels would also be significantly more expensive than street design and traffic signal changes,” the Schwartz report said.

What’s next?

While City of Boise spokesperson Mike Journee did not respond to a request for comment, the Capital City Development Corporation and Idaho Transportation both emphasized it's not a final solution.

CCDC and ITD have worked together to implement several portions of the plan - including an extensive project to expand the Pioneer Pathway connection at 11th and Myrtle.

“Other near-term improvements include expanding corners and shortening pedestrian crossing distances at 20 locations along Front and Myrtle, set to occur with the resurfacing of those streets next spring,” CCDC Project Manager Matt Edmond said.

Trimboli said the plan is one idea for the future - but more negotiation needs to happen.



TRIMBOLI

“The plan they’ve presented is to one extreme and we need to find one that’s balanced,” he said. “We want to work with the City. We’ve had some conversations with them, and like to see some of our suggestions wrapped into the plan. “

Trimboli said his agency and the City worked together on the Broadway Ave. bridge completed last fall and hopes something similar can happen with this project.

“Let’s find solutions We worked through Broadway, we can work through them on this to come up with a future plan that will be the best for all involved.”

Edmond echoed the need for more collaborative work to come.

“The Analysis offers a menu of other changes to Front and Myrtle that, while promising, are somewhat more complex, and so will require additional analysis and stakeholder outreach, both by CCDC and its partner agencies in the coming months.”

Schwartz’s firm and two partner companies collected about \$200,000 for the review project.