
The Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway story

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Abstract In the mid-1990s, the city of Des Moines, Iowa was planning a major transport project. The Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway was intended to divert anticipated auto traffic from downtown streets to an elevated freeway encircling the western and southern borders of downtown. Local business leaders became concerned, however, that the highway would cut off development in an industrial area just south of the central business district. This paper describes the circumstances that precipitated a rethinking and eventual redesign of the highway, the process that created a more appropriate design, and the results that ensued from the redesign. Key aspects of the paper are: the trust that had been built between city officials and business leaders; the concept of elevated freeways and their impact on urban development; the question of citizen participation in the planning and redesign process; the introduction of value engineering as a method for redesign; the presence and intervention of intermediary organisations; and the driving force of residential development in and around downtowns.

Keywords: *freeways, value engineering, citizen participation, trust, intermediary organisations, downtown residential*

INTRODUCTION

For several years, city planners in Des Moines, Iowa had been envisioning a new highway, a freeway loop that would connect the existing I-80 corridor running along the north edge of downtown with a proposed expressway forming an eastern border of the metro. That project would create a southern loop around the lower half of downtown, and was envisioned as an elevated, limited access freeway. The city's traffic engineers believed that this elevated freeway was necessary to meet 2025 projected traffic levels.

By 1992, the project was moving ahead. Funding commitments had been received from both state and federal government sources, and other hurdles had been

cleared. It looked like the project was finally going to become a reality.

By 1996, however, two events intervened. First, business leaders, particularly those who held leadership positions in the Des Moines Development Corporation (the local CEO-level civic group, commonly known as DMDC), began to have misgivings about the potential impact of the project. These concerns deepened to the point where the co-chairs of DMDC commissioned a local architecture firm to build a scale model of the road. This model, over 5 meters long, was placed on display in a downtown office building. As more people came to view the model and compare it to the two-dimensional drawings, doubts and misgivings became more widespread.

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About that time, the then mayor of Des Moines, Arthur Davis, announced that he was suffering a recurrence of colon cancer and would be resigning from his position. The mayor serves as one of seven members of the City Council, and with his resignation, that left six Council members, three of whom favoured the current design of the road and three of whom were opposed. With a divided Council, a 3–3 vote for final approval would kill the project.

THE PROJECT IN JEOPARDY

This caused great concern among city government leaders. This was the largest transport project in recent Des Moines history, and losing the project at this late date would jeopardise future transport grants from state and federal sources for years to come. But, despite personal pleas by the resigning mayor, opposition to the project was firm and growing.

Sensing the impasse and the potential for major damage to the city's relationship with funding sources, city manager Eric Anderson proposed a novel solution. He asked three individuals — the president of the downtown organisation, the former director of planning for the city and the chair of the city's planning and zoning commission — to form a small working group and come up with a workable solution in 90 days. He pledged to the group that the city would provide funding for any consulting services that the group recommended.

It quickly became apparent that no single engineering firm had the right mix of available talent and the ability to commit that talent to such an enormous and complicated task in such a short time frame. One member of city staff, however, suggested that a small value engineering firm from Columbia, Maryland might be able to assemble an interdisciplinary team of engineers at such short notice.

A series of phone calls with this firm confirmed what had been suggested; the Columbia firm believed that they could indeed pull together the requisite talent and tackle this difficult — some believed impossible — task. A contract was quickly fast-tracked and the problem-solving team was identified and engaged.

INTRODUCING THE VALUE ENGINEERING TEAM AND CONCEPT

Mike Turley,¹ who was a member of the value engineering team, said:

‘[Value engineering] is a process used to re-evaluate decisions. Value engineering is a commonly used method that looks at ways to reduce costs or modify decisions to improve on or meet the same benefit with modifications that may be less cost or create more value (you can increase cost if value is there too). This is normally done during late stages of preliminary design when there is enough design to critique. The approach for the MLK parkway was broader in a sense that we were reviewing design concepts and preliminary decisions and that it was perhaps more of a value management approach — utilizing some of the same concepts as value engineering. The important part was that this occurred earlier than normal and broader than final design construction techniques and materials, etc.’

One item Turley clearly recalled is that the long-term traffic projections were driving the design and that revisions that included at-grade intersections could have some choke points (although the original design was still a mix of higher-type Interstate and some at-grades), which led to the discussion of trying to redistribute traffic to make it work. The fact that a grid system was there was one the team believed would allow for traffic disbursement if there was congestion. There was also the issue of a busy intersection just north of the Fleur Drive Interchange for which

the team recommended a partial grade separated structure so that there would only be two phases to the light cycle, making it work better.

At issue were multiple concerns:

- The original highway design would be elevated, at some points approaching more than 5 meters in height, thereby blocking the view of this vital area;
 - The area south of the proposed road offered a substantial amount of developable land: this had been an industrial and warehouse area and several vacant or underutilised buildings still existed;
 - A relatively new AAA baseball stadium (AAA is just below major league status) adjacent to the Des Moines River, near the confluence with the Racoon River, would be perceived as being cut off from the heart of downtown and the Court Avenue historic district;
 - On the other hand, failing to construct some type of roadway would, according to some forecasts, pour too much traffic onto downtown streets and result in gridlock.
- The process:
- The value engineering firm that assembled the team of engineers and architects also hired a ‘process facilitator’, a woman whose job it was to solicit community input, which was seen as vital to securing City Council support;
 - An open-to-the-public presentation was held at the city’s convention centre and an all-day workshop was held, providing the design team with valuable input and support;
 - The team was sequestered in a downtown hotel and worked diligently over a period of a couple of weeks to incorporate public input into a new design;
 - Based on the public input session, the design team set about creating a plan for an at-grade boulevard with signalised intersections, allowing easy access to the south;
 - When the team finished its work, the revised design was presented to the public. The public reaction was one of relief and joy.



Figure 1: MLK Parkway after redesign

Source: City of Des Moines Planning Department

MEDIA REACTION

The *Des Moines Register* headlined a story in May 1998 entitled ‘An Elegant Parkway for Des Moines?’.² The story went on to say that:

‘The revamped Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway should be an immaculately landscaped route with stunning bridges, fancy noise containment walls and plenty of architectural bows to Des Moines history, a citizens group says. An international team of architects, engineers and bridge experts last week began an intense, three-month \$100,000 effort to come up with a master plan for the six-lane road. The architects are sifting through design niceties that have graced highways and bridges from Bangkok, Thailand, to Toulouse, France. In two days of brainstorming last week, the architects and members of the Des Moines citizens committee repeated vowed that they would come up with elegant designs for bridges, noise walls and roadsides. They said they wanted the Des Moines parkway to stand out.

‘I hope this will be something that will amaze people”, said Robert Mickle, the former city planning director who is leading the committee that’s working with the architects. Mickle’s group has some early ideas for the \$114 million project. The committee of neighborhood and business leaders hopes for a landscaped parkway bordered by native plants and small hills here and there. They suggest some kind of architectural bow to the Sherman Hill Historic District, which borders the parkway. One idea would be to install special lighting fixtures in the neighborhood.’

OFFICIAL REACTION

Eric Anderson,³ the city manager at the time, said:

‘I believe this was one of the most significant projects for the future of downtown. The outcome itself was very important, but the process also contributed significant long-term value.

M L King was a major project involving millions of dollars and would structure the Downtown land use for decades to come. There was serious conflict between the business community and the City over the design of the project. Instead of making the decision on the floor of the Council, trusted representatives were charged with finding a solution acceptable to all. They were provided with impartial technical support and developed a high-quality solution supported by virtually everyone.

This process created an underlying commitment of trust, sometimes strained but never violated, became the basis of future successes. There were disagreements as we went forward, both in my tenure and I am sure in Rick’s [Richard Clark, the deputy city manager who succeeded Eric Anderson as City manager], they were resolved because of the success of the process we used for MLK and the commitments to Downtown development that it created.

Many decisions and investments, public and private, result in the success of a City’s Downtown. Collaboration and a minimum of trust between the stakeholders is essential. Both are a function of experience and success. The process we used in MLK served as an example for the future.’

Richard Clark,⁴ who succeeded Anderson as city manager, said:

‘There’s no question that building MLK Parkway on-grade as opposed to an elevated highway was the right decision. An elevated road would have severed the area and forever diminished the ability to develop the “southern downtown” to its fullest potential. An enormous effort has gone into redeveloping the area immediately south of MLK and we have seen significant investment in housing, hotels, entertainment, and other commercial. All that said, downtowns succeed or fail for a variety of reasons. If there’s one enduring thing I learned it is that success requires many actions, lots of money, and long-term commitments — plus a little bit of vision. Gateway sculpture park, river walk, east village all have been remarkably

successful and major contributing factors to the downtown. Perhaps the most rewarding news of late is the decision of a long standing WDM [West Des Moines] corporation to leave and locate a fantastic new corporate headquarters along the sculpture park. It's always nice to win one from our friends in the burbs.

I am reluctant to point to one decision as a single causal factor in the success of downtown. There were many factors though MLK was certainly an important one.'

BUSINESS REACTION

Business leaders were concerned from the beginning. Bill Knapp, a successful developer and politically well-connected individual, threatened to try to kill the project if it was not changed. Dave Hurd,⁵ former CEO of Principle Financial Group and co-chair of the Downtown Partnership, said the Partnership's work on the redesign was the most significant accomplishment in that organisation's brief history. Other prominent business leaders offered similar comments.

LESSONS LEARNED

Elevated freeways surrounding downtowns are an outmoded and discredited concept

In the era of increasing reliance on mass transit, biking, walking and with the advent of autonomous vehicles, the idea of building an elevated ring road is an idea whose time has gone.

Downtowns or town centres are increasingly being developed as places to live

Residential development is putting pressure on long-abandoned areas adjacent to the centre city for conversion to residential neighbourhoods. This has been the case in Des Moines, where the

River Point area (the area that would have been cut off by the freeway) has become a vibrant mixed-use community, with residential, office, cultural and entertainment uses.

Access to water is an incentive to development

As the River Point area develops, access to the river has provided reasons for the city and a major corporation to dramatically improve the riverfront. This in turn has drawn more people into downtown, supporting restaurants and other shops.

Public input in the process was crucial

If the design team had not engaged a 'process consultant' and invited public participation on the front end, the proposed redesign might not have had the requisite support on City Council. The will of the people was clearly expressed, and City Council accepted it.

Trust was an essential component

As Eric Anderson asserts, while there was occasionally a contentious relationship between city officials and business leaders, there was an underlying feeling that individuals on both sides saw each other as honest, trustworthy, and willing to put community welfare ahead of strictly personal interests.

The presence of an intermediary organisation proved invaluable

The Des Moines Development Corporation was a CEO organisation that spoke effectively for the major businesses. The Downtown Des Moines Partnership was a place where public and private sector leaders could sit around a table and trust that their discussions would not show up on the front page of the newspaper

the following day. While this was not a place where official action was taken, tough issues could be ironed out and complicated problems could be solved.

Neither the public sector nor the private sector can achieve success by 'going it alone'

Virtually everything of significance that now occurs in downtowns and town centres requires some form of public/private partnership or collaboration.

The success of this collaboration is abundantly evident in downtown Des Moines

In a future issue of this journal, David Feehan and other potential co-authors will outline in greater detail how the downtown was transformed over several years. This transformation produced several billion dollars in major new projects, including an arena, a convention centre, a library, a university centre, a sculpture garden, a plethora of new residential units, several new corporate

headquarters buildings, a home for the World Food Prize, a reinvigorated East Side, new hotels and a major upgrading of the riverfront.

Downtown Des Moines was labelled by the governor of Minnesota as 'dead, dead, dead'⁶ when he feared the loss of the Minnesota Twins baseball team to Charlotte, North Carolina and compared downtown Minneapolis to downtown Des Moines. That was in 1996. In recent years, major US newspapers have lauded the liveliness and beauty of downtown Des Moines. But the real measure of success, as one business leader observed, is: 'We don't want to be Las Vegas, Orlando, or Nashville. We are building a downtown for our own residents. If we do that well, others will want to come.' And he was right.

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