What is the In-Town Transit Partnership Project (ITP)?

The ITP is a public transportation study initiated by the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham (RPCGB), with a grant managed by the Birmingham Jefferson County Transit Authority (BJCTA), to identify and evaluate transit service improvement options around Downtown Birmingham and the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), as well as adjacent neighborhoods. The RPCGB has worked with government agencies, area stakeholders, and the general public to determine the preferred transit service option and to assess the environmental benefits and impacts of the recommended improvements.

Why Does the City Center Need Transit Improvements?

- The Downtown Financial District and UAB serve as economic engines for the Birmingham metropolitan area.
- Increasing traffic congestion and few transportation choices for trips to and within the City Center hinder the ability of these activity centers to reach their full economic potential.
- Transit services provided in the region are extremely limited, with 30 to 60 minute service on almost all existing local bus routes.
- There is a need for transit services that have the potential to attract a greater share of the trips to and within the study area.
- Transit improvements will support the city’s vision of a transit-friendly and pedestrian-oriented City Center.

Planning for a Regional Transit System

The long-range vision for regional transit services includes expanded local bus service, express buses, bus rapid transit, a downtown transit system, transit-supportive infrastructure, High-Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes, park-and-ride lots, and other transportation improvements for six major corridors in the Birmingham region. This strategy also envisions a downtown circulator service that provides a collection and distribution function for regional transit riders, making the connection between regional service terminal points and final trip destinations in the City Center and UAB activity centers.
What is the proposal?

In the proposal, 18th Street would serve as the north-south spine of the new system. The alignment would begin at Five Points South and run north along 18th Street. To access the Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex, the alignment would run east on 5th Avenue North and north on Richard Arrington, Jr. Boulevard. Southbound, the alignment would follow 22nd Street south to 6th Avenue North, turning west before turning south again on 18th Street. A branch of the main line would extend westward along 5th Avenue South to 9th Street, serving the UAB campus and medical facilities in that area.

The 18th Street alignment was chosen because it connects activity centers and key destinations in the City Center, UAB/Hospital District, and Five Points South. It provides a direct connection to Central Station, the planned intermodal center, as well as more direct access to government facilities, financial centers, and the region’s hospitals and medical centers including University Hospital, Children’s Hospital, Mercy-Cooper Green Hospital, and the Jefferson County Medical Center. The alignment also provides direct connections between arts, conferencing, sporting, and entertainment venues to include Bartow Arena, the Alys Stephens Performing Arts Center, the Birmingham Jefferson Convention Center, the Medical Forum, and a host of restaurants, shops, nightlife and hotels. Finally, the alignment provides the best access to redevelopment areas along 18th Street, to include both the Civil Rights and Entrepreneurial Districts along 18th Street as identified in the City Center Master Plan.

Elements of the Proposed System

- Dedicated lanes for transit.
- Signal treatments to improve transit reliability.
- Enhanced station stops to provide more amenities to passengers waiting at the stops.
- Access to and through the City Center for proposed future regional BRT services.
- Establishment of neighborhood connector routes to provide access between the in-town neighborhoods, the City Center, and the Central Station Intermodal Center.
Analysis

The preferred alternative for the ITP study area was determined based on the results of a technical evaluation process and guidance from area stakeholders to include representatives from the City of Birmingham, the BJCTA, UAB, area residents and local business. The evaluation followed the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) process that is used to consider projects seeking funding under the Section 5309 New Starts program. An initial screening of transit service types considered a wide variety of technology options including heavy rail transit, automated guideway transit/monorail, light rail, streetcar, and Bus Rapid Transit (BRT). Based on the results of the initial screening, light rail/streetcar and BRT technologies were advanced into a two-step evaluation process.

In each step of the evaluation, the number of alternatives was narrowed based on how they performed relative to the goals and objectives for the project. The evaluation also considered a Baseline Alternative, which assumes that the project will not be constructed. This process resulted in the selection of BRT as the preferred mode, and the route generally along portions of 18th Street, 5th Avenue South, 11th Avenue South, 6th Avenue North, 5th Avenue North, 22nd Street and Richard Arrington Blvd as the preferred alignment.

Project Goals and Objectives

Goals and objectives for the project were established early in the study process and reviewed by the Project Technical Advisory Committee, Project Steering Committee, and the general public at public meetings held during the scoping phase of the study. The goals and objectives formed the basis for identifying the evaluation measures that were used during the evaluation process. The project goals and objectives are:

- Goal 1: Improve Mobility and Access within the Study Area
- Goal 2: Support Local Economic Development Initiatives
- Goal 3: Enhance Cost-Effectiveness of Transit Service
- Goal 4: Protect Environmental Quality
- Goal 5: Enhance Regional Transit Services

Both the BRT and LRT alternatives performed well in comparison to the Baseline Alternative. However, the BRT Alternative performed better for Goal 3: Enhance the Cost Effectiveness of Transit Service (the capital cost for BRT was estimated at $40 million, while the capital cost for LRT was estimated at $155 million). LRT performed better for Objective 4C: Support Transit-Friendly Land Use Patterns.
Bus Rapid Transit

Bus Rapid Transit, or BRT, has been selected as the preferred technology for the new service. One of the main advantages of BRT is that it can provide the same type of service as rail transit, but at a much lower cost. BRT offers the flexibility of bus systems in that vehicles can run in mixed traffic as well as in their own special transit-only lanes. BRT features faster travel times than a typical bus; large capacities of 60 to 120 passengers per vehicle; improved comfort over conventional buses; and stops that normally have amenities such as spacious shelters, automated next-bus information, maps, and schedules.

The Lymmo vehicle in downtown Orlando features low floors, more room, and greater comfort than conventional buses. The vehicles are specially branded, so as to be easily distinguished from non-BRT buses.

The Emerald Express (EmX) in Eugene, Oregon minimizes conflict between transit vehicles and cars, enabling transit to avoid traffic tie-ups and improve speed and reliability.

This rendering shows how a BRT station stop on 18th Street at 3rd Avenue North might look. Station stops would feature helpful amenities such as shelters, maps, and signs that give next-bus arrival information in real time. The estimated cost of the BRT system is up to $40 million.
Transit-Supportive Development and the Transit District Plan

As planning has continued for improved transit in the City Center, land use planning for the area surrounding the alignment has also occurred. In the first phase of planning for transit-supportive development along the ITP corridor, a series of interactive workshops gave stakeholders the opportunity to provide input on the transit alignment, discuss opportunities for future development in the corridor, and develop an action plan for project implementation. In the second phase of land use planning, a Transit District Plan was developed, based on the City Center Master Plan. The purpose of this plan was to provide detailed guidelines for urban design, transit street infrastructure, and parking within the transit district.

The graphic above shows the proposed ITP alignment and potential redevelopment along the corridor.

The rendering above shows potential redevelopment at 18th Street and 3rd Avenue South, in the Research and Development District identified in the City Center Master Plan.

The graphic above shows the proposed ITP alignment and potential redevelopment along the corridor.
Public Involvement

Throughout the ITP project, stakeholders and the public have been actively engaged, and their comments and suggestions became an integral part of the Locally Preferred Alternative. Among those consulted during the process were neighborhood associations, civic advisory groups, environmental organizations, businesses and employers, schools and universities, hospitals, local government officials, transit agencies, and representatives from minority organizations. Public involvement included the following activities:

- Project Scoping Meetings
- Public Forums
- Transit-supportive Development Workshops
- Neighborhood Connector Workshops

The following decisions were made as a direct result of feedback from the public involvement process:

- The study area was expanded to include neighborhoods in proximity to the project area.
- An east-west connection north of the railroad was considered, and eventually incorporated as neighborhood connector service.
- Consideration was given to the accommodation of regional trips.
- Enhanced connections to the intermodal center were included.
- The alignment was chosen to provide access to important activity centers, as well as to help set the stage for specific revitalization efforts.
- Neighborhood connectors were designed to provide high-quality service to the in-town neighborhoods.

Next Steps

The next steps as the ITP project moves towards implementation involve a combination of transportation planning, financial planning, preliminary engineering, and land use planning tasks. Key next steps include the following:

- Complete a financial plan for the project that identifies federal and local funding sources that will be used to cover the capital and annual operating and maintenance costs for the Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA).
- Determine whether an existing agency or organization or a new organization would be responsible for project implementation.
- Complete the assessment of potential environmental impacts and document the results consistent with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).
- Continue the development of a transit district plan that documents the policies and incentives to be established in the area served by the project to encourage transit-supportive development.
- Incorporate the LPA into the cost-constrained Long Range Transportation Plan for the Birmingham metropolitan area.
- Report the required project information to the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) so that the project can be considered for permission to enter the Preliminary Engineering (PE) stage of project development.
- Complete PE and design for the project and further update and refine the project costs and financial plan.
- Submit the required project information to FTA and request permission to enter final design and obtain a Full Funding Grant Agreement (FFGA).
- Complete final design and construction of the project and initiate operations.