

Gehl Studio planners look for midtown, downtown connection solutions

Connectivity study paid for by a Knight Foundation grant awarded to Midtown Inc.

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The connectivity -- or the lack of it -- between midtown Columbus and downtown has been under a microscope this week.

Three planners from Gehl Studio, an internationally known urban design firm, have spent the week in Columbus looking at what connects and disconnects midtown from downtown.

They have been talking to city officials, business people and residents in the downtown and midtown areas. Volunteers have been doing surveys, counting cyclists and pedestrians in the midtown and downtown areas.

The Gehl consultants are here through a \$200,000 Knight Foundation grant awarded to Midtown Inc., a nonprofit development organization.

"It is all about better connecting people and places -- the places we all love and use whether it be the library, the museum or Broadway or the riverfront," said Anne King, executive director of Midtown, Inc.

This is the second visit by Gehl planners since the consultants were hired in March.

The process for a plan and recommendations to improve the transportation system through pedestrian, bicycle and transit connections could take about 18 months.

But the issue came into focus this week during what was scheduled to be an hour-long exercise.

The Gehl planners along with several local people tried to get from the Columbus Public Library on Macon Road to downtown and back in an hour or less.

The catch? No cars.

Two people took off on bicycles, dodged the traffic on Wynnton Road, circumvented the Norfolk Southern rail yard and made their way to the corner of Broadway and 10th Street, then made their way back, in 40 minutes.

The other group left 20 minutes earlier, caught a Metra bus on Macon Road. As the bus worked a route in the Lindsey Creek area, the clock was running.

"After a while we realized we had been circling around this neighborhood, said Sofie Kvist, one of the Gehl planners. "Time was going, going, going."

Kvist began to re-evaluate her transportation plan. But it was too late.

They did not have time to go to the transfer station and change buses. Instead, they got off at 10th Avenue and Wynnton Road and walked under the rail overpass and by the jail into downtown. The walk took about 15 minutes and they got to the designated corner but had to ride in a car back to Midtown, more than an hour and a half after they started.

"I think we could have taken a more direct bus route, but we did not know how to figure that out," Kvist said.

But there was a positive in the experience -- and a part of the solution.

"The buses were clean, air-conditioned and the staff was super helpful," Kvist said. "They need more user-friendly routes and transfers."

The city leaders -- including Mayor Teresa Tomlinson, a former Midtown Inc., director, and City Manager Isaiah Hugley -- are on board with helping find solutions to the transportation issues, said Gehl project manager Julia Day.

"One of the things that we were really struck by -- and we heard this a lot from the mayor and the city manager -- that there is so much focus on doing this work and making sure that it benefits everybody in Columbus," Day said. "They want to make sure the options to bike and enjoy the new retail and to just move around the city more freely is something everyone in the city can share. ... That is definitely something we do not hear everywhere we go. The conversation is being had at the most senior leadership level and at the very beginning of all of this work."

Betsy W. Covington, president and chief executive officer of the Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley Inc., has been involved in the Gehl study since the beginning.

"All these 'Doable City' conversations that are happening around better connectivity and how we use our public spaces to enhance public life are essential for building tomorrow's healthy cities -- and I mean 'healthy' both physically and economically," she said. "Yes, the walkability, bikeability and livability topic is about public health, environmental impact and quality of life. But it's also about economic mobility, economic integration, property values, and attracting and retaining talent."

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