

Bus riders, help is on the way

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Published: Wednesday, 01/03/07

It never made any sense.

Deaderick Street in downtown Nashville should never have become the transfer station for Nashville's public bus system. For bus riders, it's a confusing and tangled mess. For drivers, turning onto Deaderick is like a tiny bug suddenly caught on a runway: You're gonna get squished.

Starting in the spring, help is on the way. Construction will begin in April on Music City Central, a \$48 million bus depot next to Municipal Auditorium on Charlotte Avenue.

It will be the third time Nashville has attempted to create a centralized public bus transfer station. Attempts one and two were costly failures, costing millions of your federal tax dollars. This one, transit officials say, will be a keeper.

"This one is going to work well," said Paul Ballard, CEO of the Metro Transit Authority.

It's got location: Downtown workers will get dropped off right next to the core business district. It's got cover: This one will be a real building, with air conditioning and heating and bathrooms. It's got coffee: The bus depot will have a real waiting room.

"It's important that we maintain a hub in the central business district," Ballard said. "It's such a huge improvement over where we are now."

Project could ease woes

Where we are now is a mess. All city bus riders go to Deaderick Street to transfer. Buses stack up and back up, leaving traffic in a jam.

"It's awful," Ballard said. "We create traffic congestion every 20 minutes.

It's very cold in the winter and very hot in the summer. The sidewalks are not designed to handle that much traffic. Deaderick Street has been a problem every since it was opened."

That was in 1983. The location was partly tradition: Nashville's old street car line had a station at Deaderick. And it was partly practical: Deaderick is convenient for downtown workers, but it didn't have any retail. Store owners had complained their entryways were blocked by people waiting for a bus.

In June 1980, Nashville got an \$800,000 federal grant to construct a "modern transportation mall" along Deaderick Street. Politicians bragged that it would become the new center of bus travel. Designated bus lanes were promised, as were heated and air-conditioned shelters.

Downtown business owners predicted the new transfer station would create congestion. They were right, but the thing got built anyway — without promised amenities — and quickly turned into a nightmare.

The solution was supposed to be the \$4.6 million Landport, opened in 1998. Located beside Union Station, the Landport was touted by federal officials as a centralized hub for public transportation. But city officials never wanted it there. It's not convenient for downtown workers. When the Demonbreun Street bridge was ruled too unsafe for buses to cross it, the Landport was shut down. It's only usefulness lately has been a staging area for the bridge construction.

Is the Music City Central another mistake or a solution? My money's on solution. Because this time, plans are driven by customers' needs. And that just makes sense.