Minimum Grid, Maximum Impact: A Public Space and Mobility Plan for the Core Community Columbus, Georgia

Prepared for MidTown, Inc. by Gehl Studio December, 2015
We are lucky to live in a Knight City—one of 26 cities nationwide where John S. and James L. Knight once owned newspapers. It is in these cities that the Knight Foundation funds ideas and invests in civic innovators.

Just over one year ago they initiated the first Knight Cities Challenge and posed a simple question: What is your best idea to make cities more successful? They received 7,160 answers. MidTown, Inc. responded with a proposal to establish a Minimum Grid to better connect people and places within our Core Community of MidTown and Uptown. Our proposal was selected as one of 32 national winners of the first Knight Cities Challenge.

The Minimum Grid grant award has allowed us to partner with the internationally renowned urban design firm of Gehl Studio. They brought global experience and a people-first design philosophy to the project, and helped create a world-class plan that embraces our local character.

The Minimum Grid project reimagines how we connect people and the distinctive places that we love, the places that define our community. Working with the team from Gehl has been eye-opening and affirming. A great outcome of the project has been the opportunity to partner locally, to grow local connections and friendships, and to see community assets and opportunities with fresh perspective, together.

The Minimum Grid project has been guided by the board and staff of MidTown, Inc. and a local leadership team that includes Richard Bishop, President of Uptown Columbus, Inc.; Betsy Covington, CEO of the Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley; City Manager Isaiah Hugley; and Julio Portillo, Regional Community and Bicycle-Pedestrian Planner for the River Valley Regional Commission. The Minimum Grid proposal itself was bolstered by support from State Representative Calvin Smyre, Mayor Teresa Tomlinson and GDOT District 3 Representative Sam Weborn, who continue to champion this initiative. Hundreds of citizens, students, leaders from partner organizations, and staff from the City, GDOT, CSU and the MCSD have participated, observed, surveyed, listened, questioned, affirmed, advised and informed the process and resulting recommendations. Thank you, all, for imagining a more connected Core Community.

In her congratulatory note, the Knight Foundation Vice President for Community and National Initiatives Carol Coletta said, “To see Columbus embrace the concept [of a Minimum Grid] and commit to demonstrating it is a real thrill. We can’t wait to send people to see what Columbus has done.”

This report represents the culmination of the first phase of the Minimum Grid project. With your continued engagement, support and investment, we are now ready to demonstrate how an exuberant Minimum Grid can make our community a healthier, more attractive and economically vibrant place for ALL residents and visitors.

Anne R. King
Executive Director, MidTown, Inc.
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Background & Context
Columbus has a vision

From the RiverWalk to Lakebottom Park, from the zip lines to the Museum, from Uptown’s farmers market to MidTown’s Library... Columbus is a city with great destinations. Columbus is also a city that wants more.

Many of these great destinations, civic assets and ‘favourite’ places are less than 2 miles apart and are within walking and cycling distance of each other and residential neighborhoods. Yet the lack of walkable and bikeable connections - and active streetscapes between them - create a sense of distance that makes connecting to them by car seem like the best option.

Despite this, the desire to walk and bike between these places exists. When people are invited to get on their bikes and pedal from Uptown to Lakebottom they do. Stakeholder meetings and engagement throughout this process have illustrated a great demand from residents for more options in how they move around their city.

There is also a growing understanding and supporting data that these transportation options impact a city’s health and economy. While the Columbus region’s population increased by 24% between 1970 and 2013, this is a slower rate of growth than 57 of the 61 metro areas in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

Columbus wants to attract and retain more residents. Creating streets and public spaces that support more public life that is reflective of everyone who lives in the city is increasingly seen as a good place to start. From residents to local businesses to city agencies, there is a growing desire to connect people and places, and to create a Minimum Grid that demonstrates streets for people - to walk, bike, wait for transit, drive, or spend time.

Creating invitations to attract and retain more residents can start now. With pilot and demonstration projects, city and civic leaders can test how to make context sensitive designs and programs that reflect the local climate and the local desires and behaviors of Columbus residents.

This report outlines how and why these changes are possible. It illustrates key findings from public workshops, civic engagement and observational surveys, identifies a Minimum Grid; and proposes a set of pilot projects that can be tested immediately as ways to make the vision actionable.

We’re thrilled to be working with Columbus’ many civic leaders in this process and we look forward to seeing what comes next.

Sincerely,

Sources:
- Evaluating Household Chauffeuring Costs, Todd Litman, 2015
- Investing in Place, APA 2014
- The American Public Transportation Association
- U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2008–2012
- Metra Public Transit Needs Assessment, City Council Presentation, March 2010
What if... you could easily and safely bike from the River to the Woods?

What if... the walk from the Library to Country’s BBQ was convenient, safe and attractive?
Background and Context

What if...

your kids could walk and bike to school and to other activities?

What if...

bus stops connected to sidewalks and became comfortable places to wait?
Background and Context

What if... the River
What if... the Columbus Museum was a civic hub
What if... and Uptown’s entertainment were connected?
What if... where you could also spend time outside?