

CONNECT DOWNTOWN



Connect Downtown is a three-way initiative led by the City of Des Moines, Urban Land Institute Iowa and the Greater Des Moines Partnership to investigate opportunities to make getting around Downtown Des Moines (DSM) safer, more comfortable and more convenient. To build on the current momentum and vibrancy of the region's core — Downtown — Connect Downtown aims to improve access to and within Downtown where people walk, ride their bicycle, drive and use other forms of transit. Once implemented, the changes will promote more street activity, making Downtown safer and more inviting without significantly adding to the commute times for drivers.

DSM is outgrowing other major Midwest metros in terms of percentage of population growth, having grown more than 41 percent since 2000. This surge is expected to hit nearly one million residents by 2050. With more than 12,000 residents and 80,000 workers, Downtown DSM is a major part of this tremendous momentum and growth. More than 40 development projects have been recently completed or are currently underway, and more than 3,300 housing units are either planned or under construction. The [2015 National Community and Transportation Preference Survey](#) found that Americans prefer walkable communities more than they have in the past, and millennials prefer walking as a mode of transportation by 12 percentage points over driving. Walkability is a talent attraction tool. Furthermore, increasing walkability has shown a proportionate increase in retail sales and property values. In DSM, a similar project was implemented in the Ingersoll neighborhood, resulting in a 23 percent sales growth from 2008 to 2015. Other cities have seen similar increased economic growth after implementing programs like Connect Downtown. Resident and commuter feedback has spoken that two-way streets offer a more user-friendly and intuitive experience than one-way roads. Retailers have voiced a necessity for a lower speed of traffic to be conducive to an enhanced retail experience, and business owners working to retain and attract talent have highlighted just how important placemaking is. As Downtown DSM welcomes more vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists, Connect Downtown provides all residents and guests with safe access to these world-class amenities.

The Connect Downtown project began in July of 2016 with a survey analyzing existing conditions in Downtown to measure a multitude of metrics including: traffic counts, bicycle usage, pedestrian traffic, ease of crossing at intersections, sidewalk widths, sidewalk connectivity, bicycle facilities, connectivity to on-street and off-street (trail) facilities, number of accidents in the area and lane widths. Using this information, a modeling system was created to objectively analyze how the right-of-way managed traffic flows, identify pain points and locate areas where excess right-of-way capacity could be repurposed for bike lanes or other traffic calming or complete-streets types of improvements.

A stakeholder group consisting of Downtown businesses and neighborhoods has been consulted throughout the course of Connect Downtown's implementation. This group provides input to keep the Connect Downtown direction aligned with what is best for the Downtown DSM community. Together alongside Connect Downtown, these stakeholders planned a Protected Bike Lane Demo Day to illustrate the effectiveness of the proposed project. The Demo Day offered bicyclists and drivers alike to experience a mock scenario of Connect Downtown by closing streets and marking changes with temporary chalk. Video tutorials were recorded throughout Demo Day to provide non-attendants with information on how to navigate the new changes.

Similarly, two public meetings were hosted to gather input and confirm the direction of the assumed changes based on the study. Several hundred citizens provided input online or through the public forums. Additional online engagement and public outreach took place prior to the implantation of the East Grand Avenue pilot project.

The East Grand Avenue Complete Streets Conversion Project is the Connect Downtown pilot project and aims to provide better access for all users, including pedestrians, transit users, bicyclists and vehicles. The new configuration converts the layout from four lanes into two lanes with parallel parking on both sides and a

three-foot buffer lane to protect bicyclists traveling in either direction. This also implements the city's first protected bike lane. The changes are marked with enhanced paint pavement markings. Markings have also been used to improve pedestrian crossings at intersections.



Protected bike lanes have been included with the street transformation. Differing from conventional bike lanes, protected lanes are placed along the curb and safe from vehicle traffic. This is often done through the use of raised medians. For the pilot project, the Downtown DSM lanes are currently separated from vehicle traffic through designated pavement markings and paintings. Following a conceptual trial period, Connect Downtown aims to enhance these lanes by adding raised medians to empower cyclist activity throughout Downtown. Furthermore, street intersections could include painted medians and vertical delineator poles to improve crossing safety for bicycles and pedestrians, while bus stops could include raised islands for improved visibility.

Connect Downtown principles can be replicated in other communities. In DSM, what has worked well is having community advocates work closely with city officials to educate the public on why change is necessary and will benefit the community. Regular conversations are held with stakeholders and those who live and work in the impacted areas to ensure Connect Downtown is fulfilling the community's vision. Connect Downtown has also brought in national speakers to talk about what Downtown DSM can do to make its transportation system safer and more inviting for all modes of transportation.

In December of 2017, the final Connect Downtown plan was presented to Des Moines City Council for adoption. The proposed changes impact approximately 50 miles of roadway and include approximately 20 miles of bike lanes. DSM unanimously approved one of the biggest Downtown street transformations the U.S. has seen in years, switching dozens of miles of Downtown streets from one-way to two-way, improving hundreds of crosswalks, slowing auto traffic and creating a remarkably dense grid of protected, buffered and conventional bike lanes. The on-street bike facilities will help connect the region's significant recreational trail network. Implementations to three major Downtown streets are planned for 2019, with more street renovations to follow in 2020. These projects will help to maintain DSM's status as a vibrant, 18-hour city with an appeal to all generations.