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16th St. on road to future

Mosaic of upgrades mulled for the mall

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As Denver's 16th Street Mall approaches its 25th anniversary in October, local officials and business leaders are exploring upgrades that could include replacement of granite pavers in the bus lanes with concrete or even swapping out buses for streetcars.

For the past 2 1/2 decades, the Regional Transportation District has had the responsibility of maintaining the mile-long busway, which was planned along with the adjoining median and sidewalks by the internationally known design firm of architect I.M. Pei.

The mall's mosaic of 400,000 red, white and black granite pavers is its most distinctive artistic element, yet the pavers in the busway have been a bane to RTD for years.

A design flaw in the setting of the pavers caused them to loosen and sink almost from the beginning. A settlement of warranty claims led to the payment of at least \$120,000 a year to RTD for busway repairs for the past 20 years.

That hasn't been enough to solve the growing problem, however. RTD says its annual bill for paver replacement and repair now is about \$1 million.

"Mall maintenance costs are rising to a level RTD finds is not sustainable," said Stan Szabelak, RTD's manager for the mall rehabilitation project. "We definitely are in need of getting a control on that."

For RTD, the problem isn't confined to loose or broken granite. When the pavers get wet, they get so slick that shuttle buses have braking and traction problems. At times, bus drivers steer tires into the curbs at shuttle stops to assist in braking, which saddles the agency with unwanted bus repairs.

This week, officials from RTD, the city of Denver, the Downtown Denver Partnership and the downtown Denver Business Improvement District will meet to consider short- and long-term options for improving the mall's function as a transit and pedestrian thoroughfare.

Just as RTD has responsibility for the busway, the business improvement district - funded by assessments on downtown property owners - takes care of the rest of the mall, including the cleaning and repair of the median and sidewalks.

As one possible solution to the high cost of maintaining busway granite, RTD has proposed removing pavers from the transit lanes and replacing them with a poured-concrete roadbed.

The concrete alternative might give RTD "a sustainable pavement section which is durable, long-lasting and affordable in terms of maintenance

costs," Szabelak said.

One estimate puts the cost of replacing granite in the busway with concrete at about \$5 million.

However, there is criticism of such an alternative. Some say it would clash with the distinctive and artistic look of the granite on the rest of the mall.

"The use of stone for an entire street, from building face to building face, and a mile long is an investment and a legacy that Denver should be very proud of," said Tyler Gibbs, an urban design specialist with Denver's Department of Community Planning & Development.

"The Romans probably built roads of granite pavers that are still in use. It is not the material but the way it was installed that is now causing problems on the mall. Efforts to repair structural problems or improve function should respect the original design integrity," Gibbs said.

There has been some discussion of putting a pattern in the concrete or coloring it to simulate the granite look.

Yet, scoring the concrete with a jointed pattern would leave lips or edges that plows could catch, leading to damage to the concrete, said Richard Rost, an RTD engineering manager who also is working on the mall project.

Tinting the concrete is problematic because colored concrete is much harder to match as time goes by, he added.

As they assess RTD's need for relief from the burden of repairing busway pavers, officials also are considering the possible timing and financing of a total reconstruction of the mall.

The seven blocks in the middle of the mall between Tremont Place and Arapahoe Street have narrow sidewalks on each side and a wide median that doesn't serve downtown visitors very well and even poses safety problems for those walking or encamped between the bus lanes, said Downtown Denver Partnership vice president John Desmond.

Other parts of the mall to the east and west of the seven-block section are "asymmetrical," with a wide sidewalk on the north side, narrow walk on the south and virtually no space between the bus lanes, said Mark Najarian, an engineer with Denver's public works department and one of the city's representatives on the mall task force.

One concept under consideration, according to Desmond and Najarian, would be to make the mall asymmetrical throughout its length, eliminating the current jogs in the busway and straightening it out.

That would leave a wide sidewalk on the north side of the mall from Broadway to Market Street and allow the possible staging of new retailing and entertainment opportunities on the wider walkway, Desmond said.

Reconfiguring the transit lanes offers yet another opportunity to think even bigger and possibly replace lanes designed for rubber-tired buses with tracks for streetcars, Najarian said.

"If we're going to tear the thing up," he said, "let's talk about what we want for the next generation."

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25 years of mall

Some facts about Denver's 16th Street Mall:

The 13-block pedestrian and transit mall, designed by a firm led by architect I.M. Pei, opened in October 1982.

Design flaws that showed up early on led to warranty payments to RTD of at least \$120,000 a year from 1987 to the present. The payments are due to expire in 2012.

The mall shuttles handle about 64,000 passenger boardings each weekday. Since opening, there have been about 300 million boardings.

The mall is a mosaic of 400,000 red, white and black granite pavers.

RTD now spends about \$1 million a year repairing and replacing pavers in the busway.

A standard paver is 16 5/8 inches square and as much as 4 1/4 inches thick. RTD's contractor replaces about 2,300 each year. Each standard replacement paver costs \$191. Other specialized corner pavers cost as much as \$3,650 apiece.

Source: Regional Transportation District; Downtown Denver Partnership