

Midtown Station: MDP and CTP Review

Executive Summary

Midtown Station proposes unprecedented levels of intensification through high density, mixed-use and transit-oriented redevelopment in Fairview Industrial. This would be enabled by an infill Light Rail Transit (LRT) Station the developer proposes to fund and construct. However, the Municipal Development Plan (MDP) and Calgary Transportation Plan (CTP) identify the majority of the subject site as appropriate for only Standard Industrial development. Amendments to the MDP and CTP would be required to advance the proposal.

As primary opportunities from amending the MDP and CTP, advancing Midtown Station would enable an ambitious vision for significant housing and employment opportunities within the established areas. This would support Calgary's balanced growth, mobility choice and climate action objectives, if development generates net new demand. An infill LRT station and active mobility upgrades would also expand the Primary Transit Network and Always Available for All Ages & Abilities (5A) Network to benefit more Calgarians, at potentially reduced cost to The City of Calgary (The City).

As primary risks, the application proposes significant intensification outside of Calgary's strategic growth framework and is not aligned with our commitment to growing in areas well-served by existing infrastructure. Major upgrades, particularly the proposed infill LRT station, are needed. Should there be no net increase in demand due to Midtown Station, intensification here would also draw demand from areas already appropriate for these intensities, resulting in negative financial outcomes for developers and The City.

Reviewing these opportunities and risks, alongside the other aspects of this report, will provide a strong foundation for informed decision making. Should Council identify a net benefit from advancing the Midtown Station vision, amending the MDP and CTP to identify the site as a Community Activity Centre is appropriate.

The Importance of Strategic Growth

As we prepare for a city of two million people, the MDP and CTP envision that all areas of Calgary will help to accommodate the housing, commercial, employment, education and amenity opportunities Calgarians need and expect. However, not all areas are able to support significant intensification of people and jobs.

The MDP and CTP strategically direct such intensities to areas that already have the necessary services and infrastructure, particularly the Greater Downtown and around existing LRT stations. This makes efficient use of existing infrastructure to prioritize timely returns on private and public investment. It also supports timely completion of financially stable communities, so they have the amenities residents and workers deserve.

Conversely, redirecting significant growth to areas that are not well-equipped introduces risks for Calgarians, Developers and The City. With demand spread over more areas, more investment is required in more places. More areas will develop, but each will develop slower than if growth remains focussed. This causes delays in the completion of communities and compromises quality of life. Spreading intensive growth thinly also means more areas will be delayed in reaching the critical mass necessary to achieve a sustainable split for operating costs versus new property tax revenue. Return on both private and public investment is delayed as well.

Evaluating Midtown Station

Midtown Station was evaluated against all MDP and CTP policies. No one policy can drive decision-making and they cannot be viewed in isolation. For informed decision making, it is essential to have a comprehensive understanding of both the opportunities from compliance and the risks from non-compliance.

For this report, Midtown Station's compliance with the Key Directions for Land Use and Mobility provide a clear summary of MDP and CTP alignment. The Key Directions underpin the documents' policies and encourage developments likely to move Calgary toward our collective vision for the city we want and need to achieve.

1. Achieve a balance of growth between established and greenfield communities

Benefit: The proposal represents unprecedented intensification within the established areas which, if built, would support the MDP's objectives for directing more growth to established areas.

Risk: More than sufficient land exists city-wide that is already approved and serviced to accommodate the growth proposed. Midtown Station is unlikely to create net new demand. It is more likely development would draw demand from existing growth locations, resulting in little or no net gain in established areas growth.

2. Provide more choice within complete communities

Benefit: Following collaboration between the applicant and Administration, the Direct Control was updated to propose a greater variety of heights, densities and building forms. This also resulted in a requirement for a minimum of ten per cent affordable housing in order to achieve the proposed ultimate heights and densities.

Benefit: Alongside the broader Heritage Communities Local Area Plan, a wide variety of housing forms would be possible in the larger area. The diversity of employment and retail opportunities may also increase.

Benefit: An infill LRT station, along with new local retail and employment opportunities, may generate increased demand for redevelopment in communities such as Fairview and Kingsland.

3. Direct land use change within a framework of Activity Centres and Main Streets

Benefit: Establishing Midtown Station as a new Community Activity Centre may serve to catalyze redevelopment in the surrounding area, should there may be a net increase in market demand.

Risk: The site is, with the exception of one property, not located within an Activity Centre or on a Main Street

Risk: The proposal would draw demand from existing city-wide strategic growth locations, as well as from the adjacent Chinook Major Activity Centre. This may result in slower build out of other growth locations, less efficient use of existing infrastructure, as well as delayed return on private and public investments.

4. Link land use decisions to transit

Benefit: The application proposes an infill LRT station. Given such a station is necessary to support the ultimate intensification proposed, a clear link between land use and transit is established.

Risk: The proposed intensities cannot occur without this station. Failure for any reason to build and operate the station would make the proposed development nonviable.

Risk: Failure to realize the station would mean the site would no longer be aligned with the intent of an Activity Centre, which requires higher-level Primary Transit Network service.

5. Increase mobility choices

Benefit: With an infill LRT station, residents and workers of Midtown Station and surrounding communities would have more sustainable mobility options.

Benefit: The updated application proposes active mobility connections both on-site and to adjacent areas. Wide sidewalks and protected wheeling lanes are now proposed throughout, in addition to a central active mobility spine and a 5A Network connection across the LRT and freight rail corridors into Fairview.

Risk: Active mobility connectivity to the primary employment and shopping destination in the area, Chinook Centre, is poor. Connectivity has also worsened in recent years with the necessary closure of two substandard active mobility underpasses. Improvements, likely involving City investment, are required at the intersection of Macleod Tr and Glenmore Tr S to ensure a safe, accessible and comfortable connection.

Risk: While confirmed at development permit, expected motor vehicle parking rates are very high for a transit-oriented context. Higher parking rates result in excess trip generation, higher greenhouse gas emissions and more conflicts with other street users. They also reduce the benefit of investment in sustainable travel options.

6. Develop a Primary Transit Network

Benefit: The proposed infill LRT station would expand Primary Transit Network potential.

Risk: Adding stations mid-system reduces transit frequency. This reduction can either be accepted or mitigated through increased transit costs and associated funding. Funding to maintain or improve transit operations is not included within the applicant's proposal to fund the infill LRT station and would likely require City investment.

Risk: Realizing a developer-funded and constructed infill LRT station would be financially, legally and technically complex. Failure for any reason to build and operate the station would make the proposed development nonviable.

7. Create Complete Streets

Benefit: The updated application proposes wide sidewalks and protected wheeling lanes throughout the site. Additionally, street trees, street furniture and other streetscape amenities are proposed.

Risk: Active mobility connections within the surrounding area are either not provided or generally do not meet the levels expected for 5A connectivity. Additional upgrades, likely funded by The City, may be required to ensure connections between surrounding communities and Midtown Station are safe and practical. Advancing upgrades here will compete for funding against other established areas that are already awaiting upgrades.

8. Optimize Infrastructure

Benefit: Realizing intensification within the established areas reduces reliance on constructing new infrastructure on The City's edges in order to accommodate a growing population.

Risk: Shifting demand and investments to this new location does not make efficient use of existing infrastructure within already approved strategic growth locations.

Risk: Existing site infrastructure cannot facilitate the proposed development. Significant upgrades, including but not limited to an infill LRT station, are required.

Risk: Development at these intensities would be more cost-effectively and efficiently accommodated in the various Calgary areas that are already approved and serviced for this level of intensification.

Community Activity Centre vs Major Activity Centre

Community Activity Centre is proposed as the appropriate MDP typology for Midtown Station. This typology is consistent with Midtown Station's vision for higher intensity and mixed-use development that is enabled by robust Primary Transit Network service. Community Activity Centres also serve as destinations and hubs for multiple surrounding communities, which is the appropriate expectation to set for Midtown Station.

Unfortunately, site constraints limit Midtown Station's ability to provide the connectivity necessary to serve as a city-wide and/or regional draw. While an infill LRT station would provide sufficient Primary Transit Network connectivity to Midtown Station, overall street network and 5A Network connections to the site would still be limited due to significant constraints posed by the LRT corridor, freight rail corridor and Glenmore Trail. This makes the site best suited to the local draw expected from a Community Activity Centre.

The Major Activity Centre typology was considered for Midtown Station and is unsupportable. While this typology also anticipates higher intensity and mixed-use development enabled by robust Primary Transit Network service, Major Activity Centres must be able to facilitate a city-wide and/or regional draw. Midtown Station cannot facilitate this level of activity and, as such, it does not qualify as a Major Activity Centre.

Conclusion

The question of whether to add Midtown Station as a new strategic growth location is one of priorities. Keeping with existing growth priorities will see Calgary continue with the sound strategic direction of the MDP and CTP. It is the safer option. However, changing Calgary's growth priorities also enables new opportunities that were not expected at the time of developing the MDP and CTP. Changing our strategic direction is the riskier option, but, when new opportunities are compelling, change could be worth the risk.

Not amending the MDP and CTP to advance Midtown Station would mean significant intensification continues to be focussed in existing approved locations. While that change would not happen in Fairview Industrial, Calgary is unlikely to miss out on growth potential overall. Fairview Industrial is also not identified for significant intensification and enabling such intensification here poses major risks. Specifically, risks to Calgary's ability to grow in a strategic manner that makes efficient use of existing infrastructure to support timely return on private and public investments.

Amending the MDP and CTP would advance the ambitious vision for established areas growth presented by Midtown Station. As noted elsewhere in this report, the land use, outline plan and road closure applications are also significantly improved on the vision offered by the initial application. With an infill LRT station in place, Midtown Station would enable major opportunities to improve not only the immediate Fairview Industrial area, but also surrounding communities such as Fairview and Kingsland.

If the opportunities of Midtown Station are deemed to be worth the associated risks, the MDP and CTP should be amended to enable Midtown Station as a Community Activity Centre.