

# Burnside/Couch Alternatives Urban Design Technical Memorandum

## Revised Draft

November 17, 2006

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## Urban Design

The urban design analysis and evaluation is part of a larger study of ten alternatives that propose improvements to West Burnside and Couch between the Burnside Bridge and NW 24<sup>th</sup> Place. Today, Burnside lacks area for people, parking and building access. By any standard, the sidewalks are far below acceptable widths and are uncomfortably narrow (mostly 8-feet west of the park blocks and 12-feet in the densest areas of lower Burnside) which prohibits any significant streetscape improvements that would invite pedestrians to use Burnside to access businesses or destinations.

At the Central City contextual level Burnside is a grand street at the heart of the City. It contains many of the elements that comprise great streets; transit, large median trees, vibrant surrounding districts and intersecting parks. Physically and symbolically, Burnside is the east/west base line that marks the north and south quadrants of the City. Historically and culturally, Burnside is an important and iconic street at the heart of Portland. But at the ground level, for pedestrians and cyclists, Burnside is a place to avoid. However, avoiding Burnside is difficult for pedestrians who are moving to and from downtown destinations. It creates a barrier between Old Town/Chinatown and Downtown, Goose Hollow and the historic Alphabet District in northwest Portland and between the West End and the Pearl District. Burnside has some of the widest pedestrian crossing distances (78-feet) and has 15 of the most dangerous intersections in the City within the project area. The greatest amount of right-of-way area is dedicated to automobile traffic in an inflexible configuration that denies left turns, favors green signal time for east and west travel and causes significant out of direction travel.



Couch on the other hand is a typical downtown 60-foot right-of-way lined with several underdeveloped parcels, commercial and retail businesses and the emergence of upscale housing in the thriving Pearl District. Couch can be compared to SW Washington, Stark and Salmon Streets, however, it was recently converted to a two-way street. It has adequate sidewalk widths (12-feet) that are buffered by on-street parking, street trees, urban street furnishings and curb extensions that improve pedestrian visibility reduce pedestrian crossing distance. Significant pedestrian and vehicle conflicts are occurring at NW 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Avenues where through traffic competes with traffic destined for the south side of Burnside and the West End. Today, westbound Burnside traffic uses NW 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Avenues and Couch to make left turns which complicates pedestrian circulation. The same condition can be found at NW Broadway where westbound Burnside traffic uses the 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue bus mall, Couch and Broadway to make southbound left turns.

Based on the 2002 adopted Burnside Couch Transportation and Urban Design Plan, ten transportation and urban design concepts were developed to answer one primary question: What is the best alternative for improving Burnside and Couch? This question was in response to concerns raised by the Bureau of Planning and by individuals about traffic operation in the lower and central areas of west Burnside. The Northwest District also requested a second look at the potential of eliminating a travel lane and widening the sidewalks on Burnside from the North Park Blocks to NW 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and what the traffic consequences would be to other local district streets.



NW Couch Between 10th and 11th Avenues with 12-foot wide sidewalks

A subsequent study of the extension of the one-way system to W 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Avenues at Burnside and Couch considered the creation of a major neighborhood gateway, development opportunities and roadway configurations. This study is found in the appendix.

Five urban design evaluation criteria were developed as a basis for comparing each alternative against a No-Build/Existing Conditions alternative. They include human scale, urban form, urban identity, linkages and sustainability. Other statistical evaluation criteria such as economics, safety and bicycle and transit operations are found in the traffic and economic analysis sections of this report. Specific definitions of the urban design criteria and alternative ratings are found in the Burnside/Couch Alternatives Urban Design Analysis and Evaluation found in this appendix.

Three fundamental assumptions guided the urban design evaluation process:

- Burnside and Couch are both mixed use urban streets with ground floor commercial and retail combined with residential and office uses above. This pattern is found throughout much of the Central City.
- Quantity or volume of vehicles is not a significant issue. Rather, the issues are the imbalance between roadway and pedestrian space and vehicle speed and congestion.
- Burnside is grossly out of balance within the context of Portland's Central City grid system. The lack of pedestrian space and excessive traffic speeds and congestion creates a barrier.

## Key Findings

The No-Build/Existing Conditions alternative scored lowest while the Burnside/Couch one-way system to 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue scored highest. The other alternatives scored lower because they either preserved the imbalance between vehicular space and pedestrian space or made minimal contribution to improving linkages or changing the overall identity of Burnside. The Burnside/Couch one-way system also provided the greatest opportunity for significantly improving urban form by better complementing the Central City's walkable street system, providing stronger gateways, making plazas and providing transitions between the public right-of-way and buildings. The one-way system also provides the greatest number of opportunities for improving sustainability within the public right-of-way by enabling the greatest area for "green streets" applications, adding bicycle use to Burnside and significantly improved access to transit.

