

DOWNTOWN'S NEW STOP: INSIDE THE BUS STATION RELOCATION

'Epicenter of crime'? Data suggests otherwise

The current Campbell Court bus station is about as safe as the City Market building, a big tourist draw.

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Do fisticuffs, drunkenness and loitering make Roanoke's bus station the "epicenter of crime downtown"?

That's been the claim of Bill Chapman, a developer who opposes for various reasons the city's plan to move the station next to his Salem Avenue apartments, which abut Big Lick Brewing Co. The current station on Campbell Avenue is a "crime magnet" that has "no place downtown" or near his residents, Chapman told the Roanoke City Council earlier this year, citing 911 calls and the city's online crime map.

In recent months, Chapman and allies have repeated that the Campbell Court bus station saw 29 arrests in a six-month period, the most anywhere downtown, compared to four arrests near his Lofts at West Station.

But a closer look at the data reveals that's not true. The city's crime map displays incidents, not arrests, and isn't address-specific.

In fact, Roanoke's bus station is about as safe as its City Market Building, a tourist draw replete with office workers on lunch breaks, according to a Roanoke Times analysis of police and emergency dispatch data.

For Campbell Court, the vast majority of police reports and 911 calls consist of offenses that law enforcement doesn't consider serious crimes: trespassing, drunkenness and other alcohol-related violations. While Campbell Court has more reports of crime than anywhere near West Station, it is not a high-crime location.

The bus station's per capita rate of serious crime — which is how police measure crime — is on par with the Market Building, which sees about half the amount of foot traffic as the bus station, according to rough estimates from building management and businesses and from Valley Metro. Depending on foot traffic estimates, Campbell Court's rate is even less than that

at some popular downtown bars.

In an interview, Chapman expressed concern that current and potential West Station residents won't see it that way.

"Come on, what resident is doing a per capita analysis?" Chapman said. "Does that map tell them, 'Criminologists say you shouldn't look at this because it's complex?' No. They look at it, and they look at the amount of crime that happens on that block."

(The city's map does caution people against using its data alone "to make decisions or to make comparisons regarding the safety of a given area.")

But if the Roanoke City Market Building has a comparable crime rate, how does Chapman square his characterization of Campbell Court as a "crime magnet"?

"I don't own real estate in the market," Chapman said.

'We can argue that the data has flaws'

Criminologists say crime analysis is more complicated than Chapman's review of data.

Looking only at 911 calls and police reports isn't sufficient to measure a site's crime rate, according to Rachel Santos, a Radford University professor and expert on crime data.

"I've done studies like this before and to do a good job, it's not simple," Santos said.

An ideal analysis would include consideration of the types of criminal activity, contextual evidence about the site, and a meaningful comparison of data to other locations, she said.

Numbers on the city's online crime map can be deceptive.

For example, fights were the most violent type of crime reported downtown during one time period the newspaper examined, between January and July of this year. The most serious of these assaults, a shooting, happened outside the Market Building.

On the block of Campbell Avenue where the bus station sits, the crime map showed six reports of assaults during that period. But when The Roanoke Times asked the city for more details about those incidents, the picture became more nuanced.

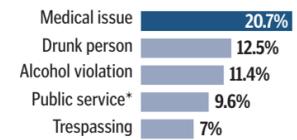
Two assaults were reported at Campbell Court, while three were reported across the street,

Why are the police called?

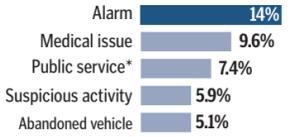
Top 5 reasons police were called in 2018 to three locations downtown:



Campbell Court bus station 270 calls



West Station apartments 135 calls



*Public service generally refers to any call of a non-criminal nature.

SOURCE: Roanoke Police Department

The Roanoke Times

at Sidewinders Steak House and Saloon. The city declined to give any details about the sixth. Neither incident at Campbell Court resulted in charges. In the three assaults reported at Sidewinders, police charged two people with simple assault. Meanwhile, five assaults were reported at the Market Building during the same period, and three people were charged.

"We can argue that the data has flaws. That's out of my realm," Chapman said. "All I know is this is what the site shows."

Police have logged more reports of serious crimes at the bus station than near West Station. Data obtained from the police department shows that between March and mid-September, the bus station had seven reports of serious crimes: two assaults, four thefts and a false pretense offense. Over the same period at West Station, police logged zero reports of crime, only an abandoned vehicle.

In drawing attention to crime near the bus station, Chapman says it was not his intention to denigrate bus riders, which is how some critics, including some members of the

Roanoke City Council, saw it.

"They say, 'Oh, you just don't like people that ride the bus.' That's not true," Chapman said. "Our residents ride the bus."

Lucas Thornton, who is developing Campbell Court into apartments and shops, described Chapman's opposition to the bus station move as "myopically self-centered and focused on his own interest which he perceives to be threatened, which I feel is veiled classism at best and veiled racism at worst."

Chapman insists he has nothing against riders of Valley Metro, of whom 71% earn less than \$20,000 per year and 45% are African American, per the transit agency's latest survey.

"Whenever people talk about the bus station, it's always an 'Uck.' Or there's always, you know, people drinking outside or there are fights outside, or they always have a problem with crowd control," Chapman said. "And for the record, I don't think this has anything to do with bus ridership. I think it's a crowd-control problem."

'We're going to hang out'

Outside the bus station, Kathy Buie can often be found holding court. She sits on the stoop or on an orange milk crate, talking with friends and calling to passersby.

"You see everybody. It's like a meet-up place. Basically, that's what it is," she said.

Buie, 52, takes the bus downtown from her home in the Melrose-Rugby neighborhood to break up her day for a couple of hours. She and others who gather in front of Campbell Court said they see the city's plan to move the bus station as an effort to gentrify the neighborhood.

"They're trying to get rid of the crowds and put in expensive apartment buildings, when you have all these homeless people," Buie said. "Regardless of where they're moving it, we're going to hang out."

The possibility that people like Buie (who has been found guilty in Roanoke court of drinking in public, among other misdemeanors) will sit around the new bus station has West Station officials on edge. In a September email to residents, a manager warned of "the probability that illegal, or uncomfortable, activities that occur around the current station will transfer as well."

Levi Wright, who recently lived in the Hancock apartment building near the bus station, says he has felt uncomfortable but never threatened by crowds outside Campbell Court.

"Nobody wants to be carrying their groceries in or walking their dog and be hit up for money," the 30-year-old sales manager said. "These people aren't your neighbors, these people are just basically hanging out on your front yard."

Erin Polley, executive director of a neighboring law firm, says she's never felt unsafe walking by the bus station. "That's just your normal, everyday lifestyle in a downtown area," she said.

Scott Howard, the owner of Sidewinders, welcomes the city's plan to replace the bus station with apartments and shops. But he rejected the description of the station as a crime magnet.

"You're going to have crime anywhere," Howard said. "The Roanoke Police Department has done a really good job with the bus station."

Police haven't done an analysis of the sites. "There is no way to predict how the move will impact potential crime numbers" due to many variables, a spokeswoman said. Those include the architecture of the new open-air station, and the presence of convenience stores around the current station that Chapman and others blame for contributing to some of the crime.

Neil Aneja at the adjacent 7 to 7 Grocery — where customers can find beer, fish sandwiches, cigarettes and pickled eggs — says the store will close when the landlord says it's time to go.

Aneja looked at a property near the site of the proposed station, but it was too expensive. He predicted the closure of Campbell Mart opposite the bus station and Zena Market at First and Salem because "all of us rely on the bus station," he said.

Around Campbell Court, panhandling and sidewalk blocking are among the worst behavior he's seen.

"Everybody's 100% harmless. It's just annoying, that's all it is," Aneja said. "There's no danger, for heaven's sake."

Staff writers Matt Chittum and Jeff Sturgeon contributed information to this report.

NEW: Replacement of old, outdated station seen as 'critical'

FROM 1

money that we've put into this area is the largest asset that I have."

City officials say a new station is long overdue, believe they have chosen the best place for it and can find the \$9.5 million estimated cost.

To receive federal funding for the bus station, however, the bus project must first undergo a review to determine the effect on the area's historic attributes.

Chapman and allies have

created the Salem Avenue Business Association to fight the project.

A bus station is wildly incompatible with what's near it, according to Chapman, who asserts that the Roanoke Board of Zoning Appeals should not permit it. And if it does, he said opponents are prepared to fight in court.

Confident city leaders are pressing on. They plan to apply for a special exception permit early in 2020.

"You're taking an existing building that's reaching the

end of its useful life and is certainly complicating operations and replacing it with a new building that now will go for another 30, 40 years minimum [and] will make service that much better for those that are actually using it," City Manager Bob Cowell said.

The city-owned Valley Metro bus service is heavily used by the city's low-income residents, but the current bus station falls short of what's needed. Cities that Roanoke competes with for economic develop-

ment have built new stations recently.

"It's critical that it get done," said Chris Morrill, the former city manager. Morrill, under whose administration planning began, called it an urgently needed economic driver. "And you can't really wait for the most optimum time."

Old and outdated

At Campbell Court, built in 1987, modern buses struggle to come and go because they are wider and longer than when the station was

built.

The station — the oldest operating municipal bus station in Virginia, according to the Department of Rail and Transportation — teems with more than a dozen Valley Metro buses and scores of passengers during transfer times, about 20 a day.

The buses wait stacked nose to tail in multiple lines while riders take five to 10 minutes to disembark, find their next bus and reboard.

Consultants have said that the narrow boarding islands between buses

cause congestion for passengers and that moving about is a struggle for those dependent on wheelchairs or other mobility assistance.

"We are very excited about the fact that the new bus station will be bigger and brighter and better than the bus station that's there now," said Karen Michalski-Karney, who occupies a seat on the bus system board of directors reserved for a person with a physical disability. She directs the Blue

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COMMUNITY GATHERING

The Roanoke Higher Education Center will host an open community meeting on November 18th to discuss the proposed landscaped pedestrian plaza joining the main campus building to the Claude Moore Education Complex.

We invite the community to attend so we can hear your voices and gather ideas for this project.

MEETING DATE:
• Monday, November 18th
3:00 pm – 5:00 pm

MEETING LOCATION:
Roanoke Higher Education Center
108 N Jefferson Street • Room 206B
Roanoke VA 24016

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