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## We already have a human-powered circulator

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Last time it was raining when I got downtown to work, I got off the bus three blocks early.

I stayed dry, no thanks to my broken umbrella. I instead used some groovy technology from the era of bell-bottoms.

That is, I took skywalks. I can make it seven blocks, from one end of Milwaukee's scant system to the other, from the bus stop nearly to the newspaper, all indoors.

On Thursday, philanthropist Michael Cudahy squired the mayor and the county executive to Portland so they could ride rails. Mayor Tom Barrett's sold on one bit already: He's got plans for a downtown streetcar loop, like Portland has. It would cost \$53 million to do what my feet and the skywalks did: move people around downtown, either from where they get off a bus or from the parking ramp where they stash their car.

Planners call this the "park once" idea. You'd drive downtown and, guided by electronic signs pointing the way to parking spaces, you'd park without regard to location, since there'd be convenient, maybe free, transit.

Then you go to the curb, spotting the streetcar route easily because of the tracks. You wait a bit. You check your watch. You wait more. You figure the drizzle's about to let up. You pace. You tell the guy bumming "gas money" that you can't spare a tenner. You wait still more. You ponder how long nine minutes can seem. You give up when you realize you could have walked there already.

Or you could get lucky and catch a streetcar quickly. I'm just extrapolating from Portland's every-15-minutes service. Still, it makes you suspect it's a \$53 million trick to get us to walk more.

Walking's good. Pedestrians are the life of a downtown. One wonders, then, why we're considering a streetcar - which isn't about walking but about waiting and then riding - when we already have a truncated start on pedestrian culture, one floor up.

The answer is that urban planners don't like skywalks. Our former urban planner-in-chief, John Norquist, loathed them; he called them the bell bottoms of urban design. Planners dislike them because they let people get out of walking along streets, where the smart guys think you ought to be. "The street is the way of democracy," as one architecture critic put it. Skywalk users are "insulated from the jangle and jumble of real

life," said another. Less poetically, Twin Cities activists complain that the two giant skywalk networks there let people avoid having to pay off panhandlers or confront protesters. They believe this is a bad thing.

Actual people don't seem to agree. "People can't get enough of them," says Todd Klingel of Minneapolis' skywalks. He heads the Minneapolis Regional Chamber of Commerce. Virtually every major building in downtown Minneapolis is hooked up, and Klingel says he can't imagine any big new building eschewing skywalks.

Granted, Minneapolis has ferocious winters, yet it's not just the cold. On nice days, Minneapolitans take to sidewalks, says Klingel, but he says he thought nothing of an eight-block walk on a recent rainy day, because he knew he could do it inside. Other towns, people might drive. Skywalks insulate as well against hot days, of which Minnesota has plenty.

The jangle and jumble of real life - you'd call it "traffic" as you wait at a red light - you don't have that in skywalks. "You're up and on the move," says Klingel. One hates to mention this, as planners' usual prescription for the hassle of waiting to cross a street is to have all the drivers shot. But the fact is that, by overpassing cars, skywalks make a pedestrian heaven.

So much that people walk more. Peter Bruce, a consultant whose business is counting pedestrians, says Minneapolis' skywalk link to a set of huge parking ramps has raised from three blocks to five the average distance people will walk from where they park. Drivers really are parking once and hoofing it.

You're more likely to run into people you know, says Klingel, probably because they're not across a 50-foot street. Stores are more easily reached for the same reason, says Bruce, so retail is booming, just one floor up.









OK, they're not cheap: \$1 million a span, estimates Klingel. But \$53 million for a streetcar isn't cheap either. At least skywalks don't make you wait on a corner where some of the jangle and jumble of real life got soused on Thunderbird and threw up.

Up in the gerbil trails, you smell espresso carts instead. And it's never too rainy or windy or arctic for you to stop and buy, never a red light to keep you from crossing. Against that, skywalks' unpopularity with urban planners seems like a lot of fortified whine.

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