

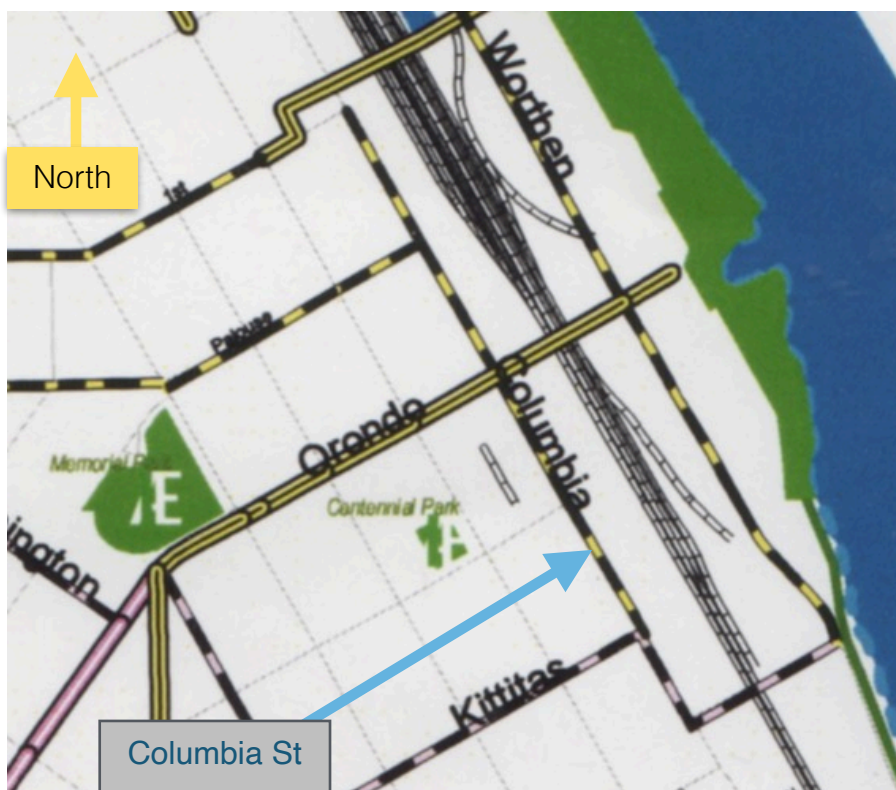
Bicycling Through Downtown Wenatchee

Past, Present, and Future

by Charles Hickenbottom

Just to be clear, this is not about riding a bicycle into downtown and stopping. Wenatchee has several options for that, such as bike lanes on Fifth St, the First St Bikeway, Riverwalk Crossing from the Loop Trail, and the lesser known Kittitas-Fuller bike route. This is about riding a bicycle through downtown Wenatchee in the north-south direction, or more precisely northwest-southeast, paralleling the direction of the Columbia River.

There are four possible ways: Chelan Ave, Mission St, Wenatchee Ave, and Columbia St. Those were the choices deliberated upon by the inaugural Greater Wenatchee Bicycle Advisory Board (GWBAB) in 1997. GWBAB was tasked by the City of Wenatchee to make recommendations for the adoption of a comprehensive bicycle plan. None of the choices through downtown Wenatchee were good. Chelan Ave and Mission St are the roads in downtown Wenatchee with the highest speeds. Wenatchee Ave, with its back-out diagonal parking, is a really scary road for bicyclists. Columbia St has a much smaller volume of traffic, but for decades has been the bumpiest road in downtown. Below is an excerpt and map regarding the committee's thinking back in 1998 taken from *Greater Wenatchee Bike Routes - A History Told Through Maps, Drawings, and Pictures* (2022).



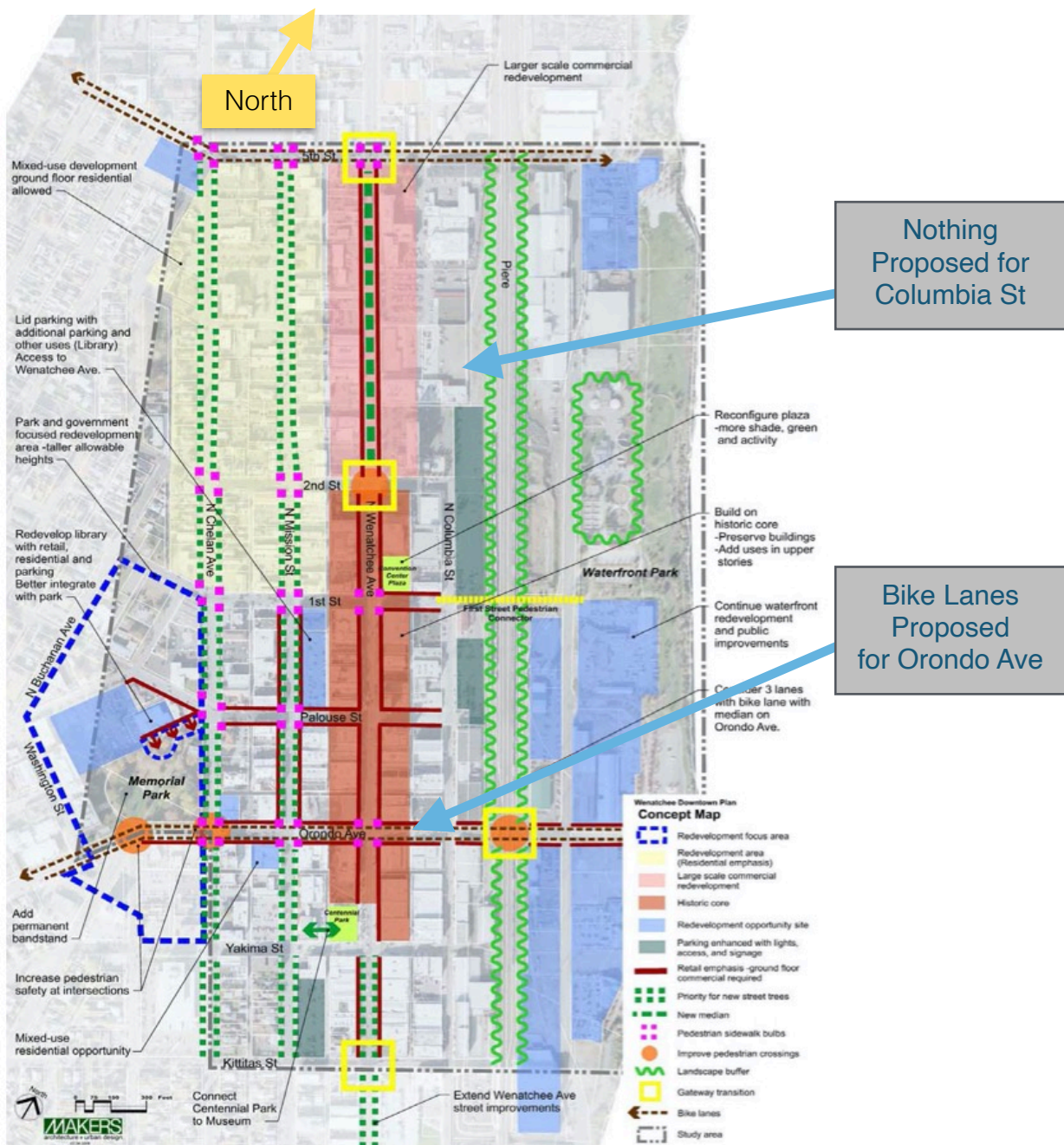
Columbia St from First St to Kittitas St (left) was suggested in 1998 as a future connector. The rationale was to have a designated bike route through downtown. A Columbia St bike route would connect with First St, Palouse St, Orondo Ave, Yakima St, and Kittitas St, all east-west streets with connections from downtown towards neighborhoods to the west.

All the bike board could hope for was some new pavement on Columbia St to improve the safety of bicycling there. With the substandard riding surface, no official designation was made by the City of Wenatchee for Columbia St with regard to bicycling. And so began a somewhat sad tale for cyclists, that for two and a half decades the City of Wenatchee has never made an adoption of a bicycle route through downtown.

In 2005 a new GWBAB bicycle map (below) as part of the board's updated bicycle plan for Wenatchee showed an expanded vision for Columbia St. It was now recognized that all the east-west roads in downtown Wenatchee between Second St and Spokane St were valuable in different ways for bicyclists to access downtown Wenatchee. Columbia St was recognized as the best of the bunch to connect with all the various east-west streets. Columbia St remained bumpy and unpleasant to ride. The City of Wenatchee did not adopt the plan, but largely ignored it. For context, this was eleven years before the City of Wenatchee adopted a complete streets policy.



2007 was a big year for city and business leaders. An adopted Central Business District plan leaned heavily on development ideas. City leaders of that era did not attend GWBAB meetings as part of the planning process. The adopted plan did not include a preferred bicycle route north-south through downtown. From a bicycling point of view, it was a major omission not to include something better for bicycling Columbia St. It's curious to note that the adopted plan included future bike lanes on Orondo St from Memorial Park down to the Loop Trail. It's curious because this adoption has never been seriously considered since then. A planning map from 2007 is included below.



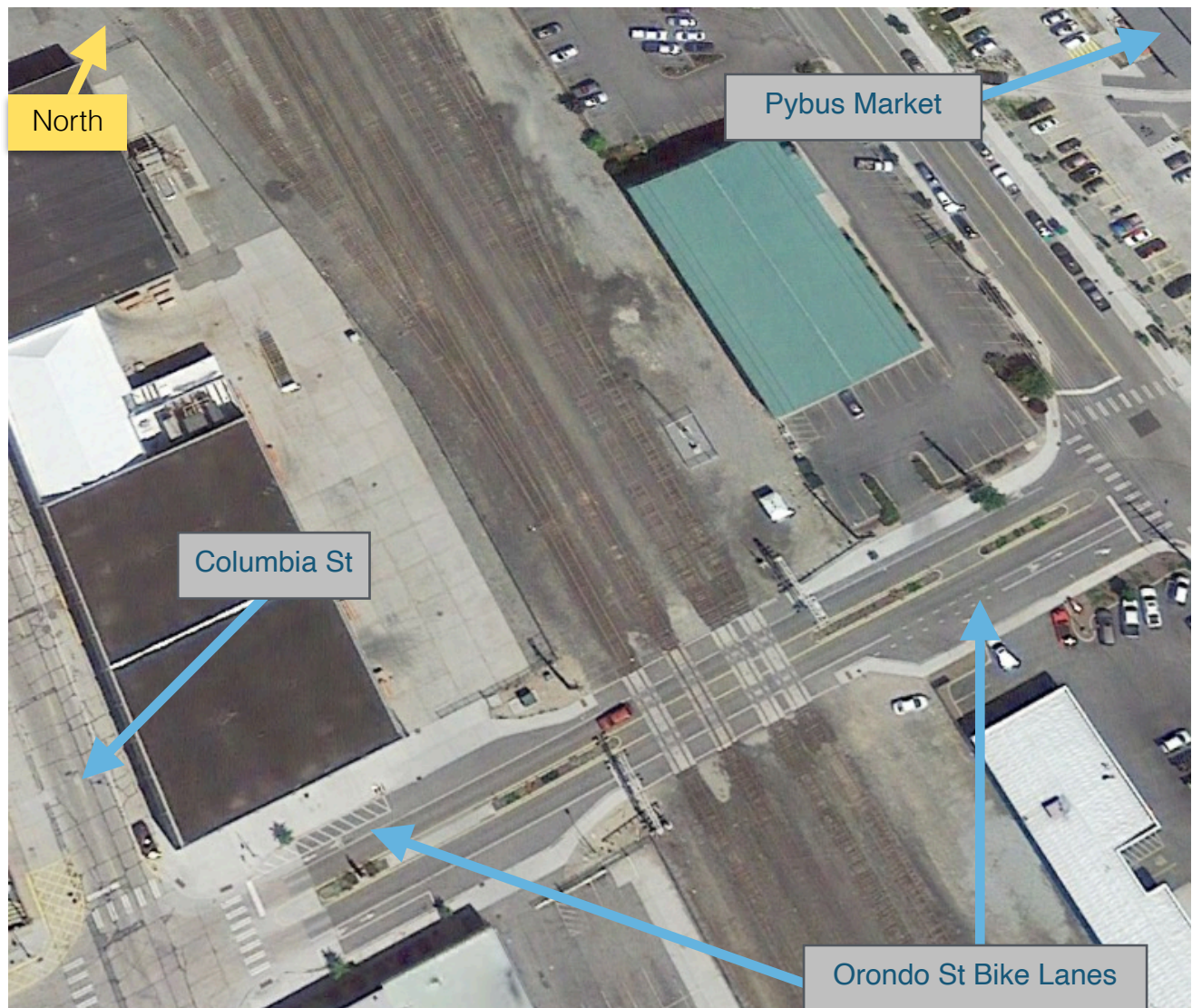
The City of Wenatchee planning in 2007 included a Central Business District subarea plan. One concept from the adopted 1998 bicycle plan was moved forward and adopted again. This was a proposal to include bike lanes on Wenatchee Ave from Fifth St to Second St. Added was a gateway theme at the intersection of Wenatchee Ave at Second St. The thinking back then was to connect the bike lanes already on Fifth St to bike lanes heading towards downtown. But not through downtown. The graphic (below) shows the proposed bike lanes.



Figure 13. Envisioned improvements on North Wenatchee Avenue..

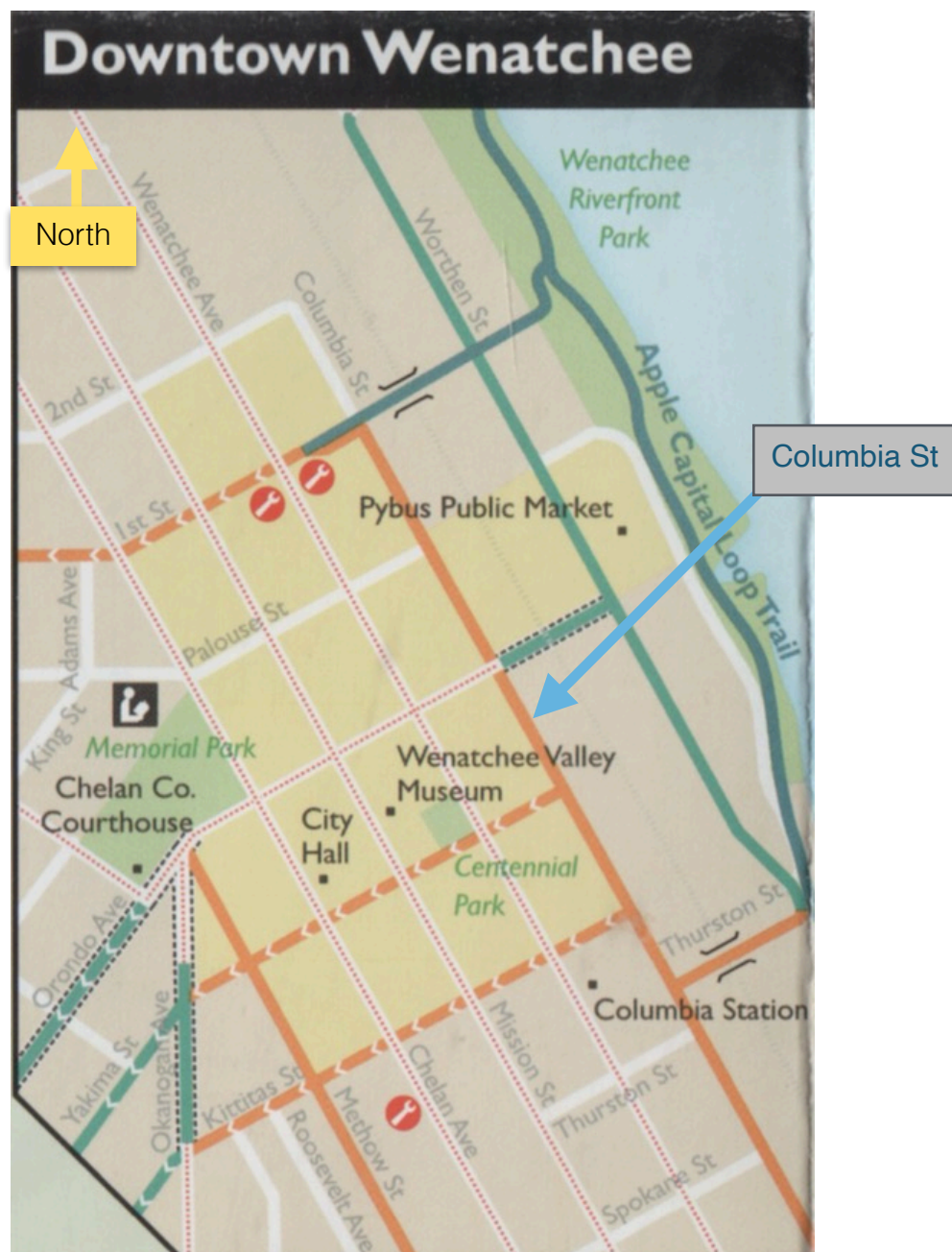
In 2013 the City of Wenatchee was planning to repave the portion of Wenatchee Ave between Second St north to Miller St. This is the time to make changes, if changes are to come, given that all new striping is placed on the roadway after paving is done. Speaking as a member of the bike board of that era, the City of Wenatchee made a bold move to suggest a "road diet." On top of the new pavement, paint would mark one travel lane each way, a center turn lane, and bike lanes in both directions. Traffic counts gave evidence that the proposed configuration could easily move the volume of traffic smoothly. During the public comments phase, business owners along the corridor were adamant in opposition of the road diet and the bike lanes. When the new paint was laid down, the status quo of two traveled lanes in each direction was painted on the roadway. Pertinent to this study of bicycling through downtown Wenatchee north-south is that there is now a recognized way in the future to bicycle between Second St and Fifth St that does not include Wenatchee Ave. Readers, please press on.

2013 was an iconic year for the City of Wenatchee, with the opening of Pybus Public Market. With all the Pybus excitement, few paid attention to the development of bike lanes on Orondo St between Columbia St and Worthen St. A bicyclist could now exit the Loop Trail at Pybus, continue west on Orondo St on a bike lane that included an improved surface to cross the BN Railroad Tracks, and connect to Columbia St to access all the east-west cross streets of downtown Wenatchee. Thus, Columbia St became more important to bicyclists, but a plan to improve Columbia St was still lacking. A Google Earth view (below) from *Greater Wenatchee Bicycle Routes* is included.



A turning point (2015) was the Our Valley Our Future planning group, whose report agreed that a bike map for the public was a priority. 2016 was also a pivotal year, when the City of Wenatchee adopted a Complete Streets policy. Hereafter, pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit riders were in the mix along with motor vehicle drivers when public right of way was being planned.

In 2017 the Chelan Douglas Transportation Council prepared the bike map, assisted by the bike committee, now known as the Regional Bicycle Advisory Committee (RBAC). It was a twenty year wait for the bicycle committee, which identified in 1997 the need for a bicycling map for general use by the public. The map brochure included a detailed inset map of Downtown Wenatchee (below). Columbia St was included with an orange colored line as a symbol to denote a somewhat comfortable street for riding a bicycle. The rough road surface remained, but the traffic volume was light. Curiously, the orange colored line designation stopped at First St, in contrast to the 2005 planning map that showed Columbia St as important as far north as Second St. Absent still was a City of Wenatchee formal adoption of a north-south route to bicycle through downtown Wenatchee.



Chelan County PUD Fifth Street Headquarters Redevelopment Community Vision (Mar, 2020), aka the "CollinsWoerman" report, was a vision developed by Chelan County PUD, City of Wenatchee, Chelan Douglas Regional Port Authority, Wenatchee Downtown Association, Wenatchee Valley Chamber of Commerce, and a community advisory group. Text from the report (below) is the first known reference from an agency other than the local bike board to champion a way to bicycle north-south through downtown Wenatchee. Other than mentioning a connection to Columbia St, there were no specifics on what Columbia St might look like.

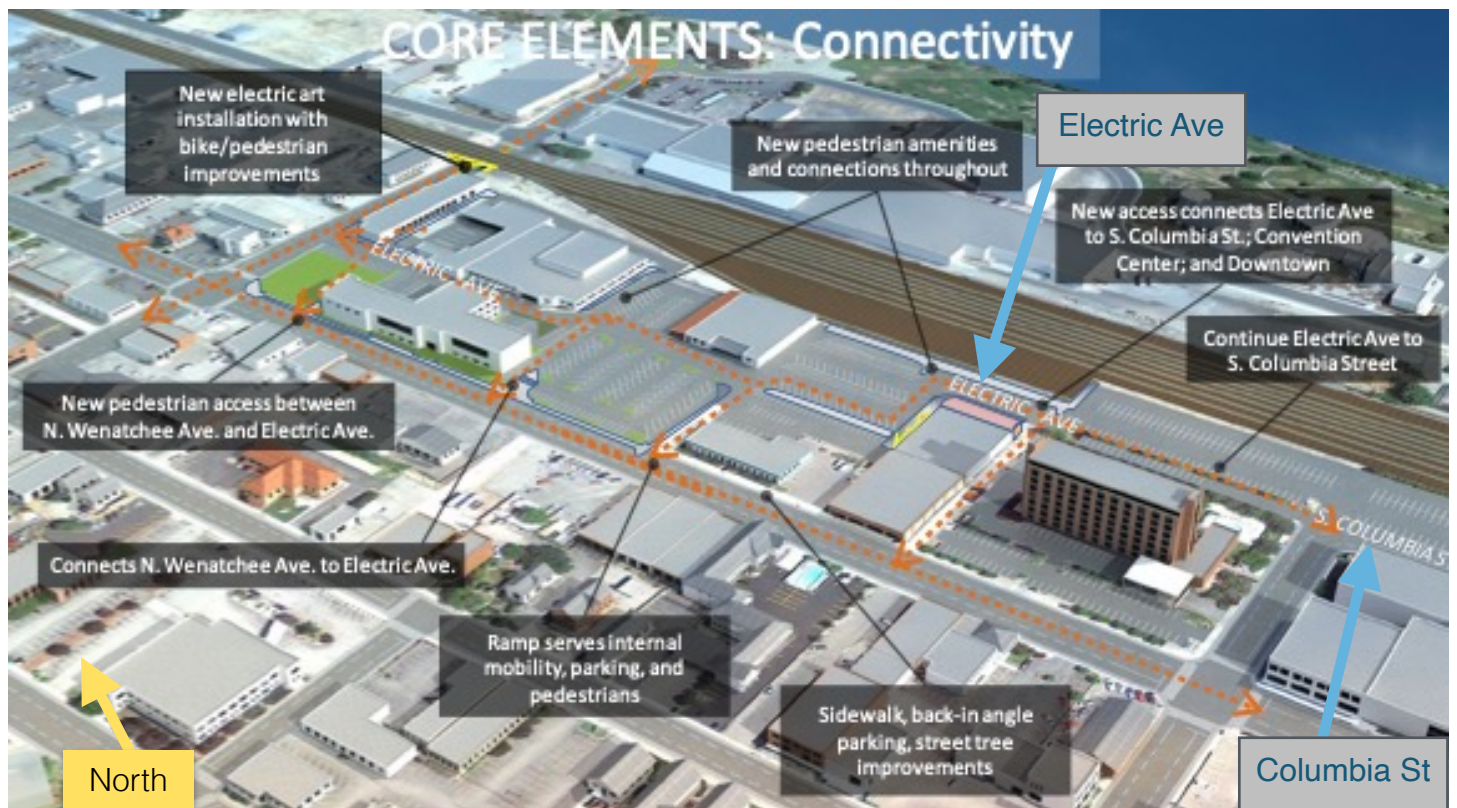
- Improve and connect the so-called 'Electric Avenue' as a new north-south spine for pedestrians, bicycles and vehicles from Fifth Street to downtown along Columbia Street to the convention center, downtown, and hotels.



A drawing (above) from "CollinsWoerman" has been enhanced to include the approximate route of Electric Ave marked in red along with a connection to Columbia St. Note that the PUD Fish & Wildlife building was in the way of the new vision. The report acknowledged that all or part of the building would need to be removed.

Another graphic from the "CollinsWoerman" report (below) shows at least part of the PUD Fish & Wildlife building removed and replaced by Electric Ave. The location of the Electric Ave label implied that Electric Ave would continue into the parking lot behind Coast Wenatchee Center Hotel.

Completely missing from the report was the background about the City of Wenatchee taking no action for decades to adopt a bicycle route north-south through downtown Wenatchee. This need was identified by GWBAB on a planning map in 1998. Two plus decades beyond 1998, it's as if the large group of planners in 2019-2020 working to produce the "CollinsWoerman" report were completely unaware of the magnitude that the Columbia St - Electric Ave concept was for bicycling.



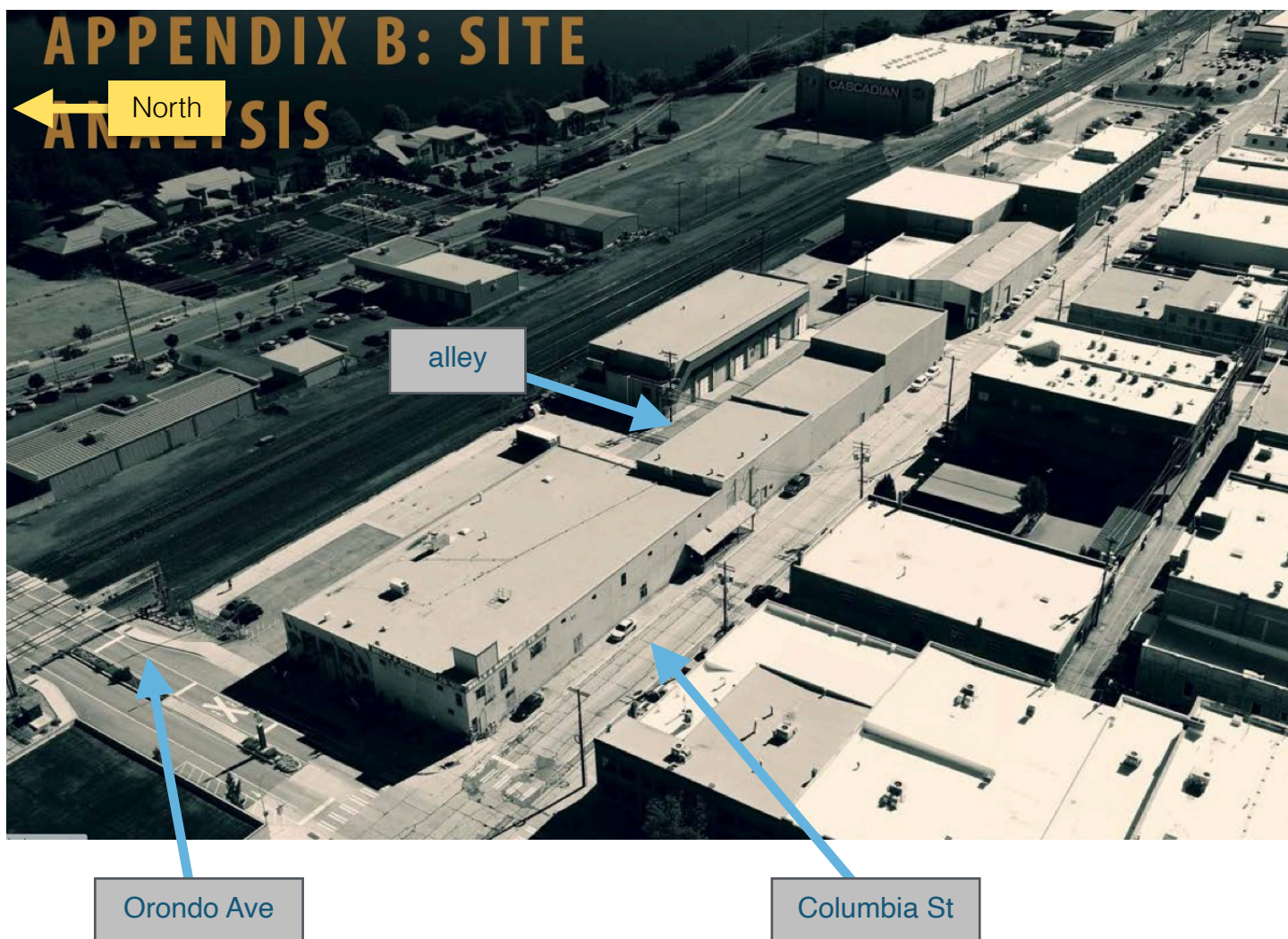


A year later (2021) the Chelan Douglas Regional Port Authority began comprehensive planning of the Lineage Properties along Columbia St south of Orondo Ave. The Port retained Graham Baba, an urban planning firm from Seattle, which began a two-year study. Stacie De Mestre, Port Director of Economic Development and Capital Projects, provided some of the preliminary work completed by Graham Baba in 2021.

Graham Baba was not hired to provide a specific vision for Columbia St. But one drawing (above) portrayed an alley that is in-between two Lineage buildings between Orondo Ave and Yakima St, just east of Columbia St. From a bicyclist's perspective, what was refreshing was the feel that bicycles belonged downtown, and that space should be available for that form of transportation.

Graham Baba's vision for the alley is quite similar to how the PUD of today envisions Electric Ave: a twenty foot wide road with no center line, sidewalks on both sides, all at the same level, no curbs, with bollards to contain vehicular traffic.

The full Lineage report was completed in 2022. An image (below) shows Columbia St, Orondo Ave, and the alley described on the previous page.



Chelan Douglas Transportation Council hosted a series of meetings in 2022 to update the Regional Bicycle Plan. It seems like a real disconnect, but the updated bike plan made no mention of the Columbia St - Electric Ave vision brought forth by the "CollinsWoerman" planning team two years prior. How could that be? No bike board members in 2019 were part of the planning team that produced the "CollinsWoerman" report. No CollinsWoerman team attended a bike board meeting. Being on the bike board all those years, one wonders if an apology is due to admit that the bike board somehow didn't connect with what was going on at the PUD campus. Covid and remote bike board meetings perhaps are worth mentioning.

Table 3-1: Bikeway Implementation Details - Wenatchee

Street/Bikeway Name	Type	From	To	Implementation Opportunities	Road Prism Impacts	Standalone Cost
1st Street (Miller Street - Elliott Avenue)	Shared Road	Miller Street	Elliott Avenue	Preservation	None	Low
5th Street Foothills Connection	Bike Lane	Western Avenue	Number 1 Canyon Road	Urban Upgrade/ Preservation	Parking – One side	Medium
5th Street Loop Trail Connection	Bike Lane	Worthen Street	Riverside Drive	Redevelopment/ Urban Upgrade/ Preservation	None	Low
9th Street	Bike Lane	Walla Walla Avenue	Elliott Avenue	Road Diet	Lanes	Medium
Bridge Street Loop Trail Connection	Bridge	Loop Trail	Wenatchee Avenue	Standalone	Parking/ Driveways	High
Broadview Extension	Bike Lane	Maple Street	Maiden Lane	Development/New Construction	None	N/A
Central Avenue	Shared Road	Princeton Avenue	Westwood Avenue	Preservation	Parking	Low
Cherry Street	Bike Lane	Miller Street	Western Avenue	Preservation	Parking	Medium
Chester Kim Road	Bike Lane	Olds Station Road	Penny Road	Urban Upgrade/ Preservation	Parking	Low
Columbia Street	Bike Lane	Spokane Street	Thurston Street	Urban Upgrade/ Preservation	Parking	Medium



Columbia St

From the 2022 adopted bike plan Table 3-1 (above) Columbia St is listed, however this is from Spokane St to Thurston St. The term "preservation" is mostly about roads with asphalt that need repaving at intervals. The part of Columbia St from Kittitas St north to Second St is a concrete surface, while rough enough to complain about, doesn't seem to get much worse. Hence, this kind of road rarely gets pavement preservation funding to smooth it out.

A year later (2023) Northwest Studio, an urban planning consultant from Seattle, was hired to "Reimagine Wenatchee." This comprehensive study of downtown Wenatchee included a thorough look at transportation. Northwest Studio would, of course, have had access to the "CollinsWoerman" vision from 2020 of Electric Ave connecting to Columbia St. Public meetings with input from citizens and City of Wenatchee staff preceded a public presentation (November, 2023). Pertinent to bicycling was a proposal for a cycle track on Columbia St from Kittitas St to Second St and a connection to the PUD's Electric Ave. From Northwest Studio's report (below) is a graphic showing the vision for Columbia St with a blue colored line to represent part of a bike network.

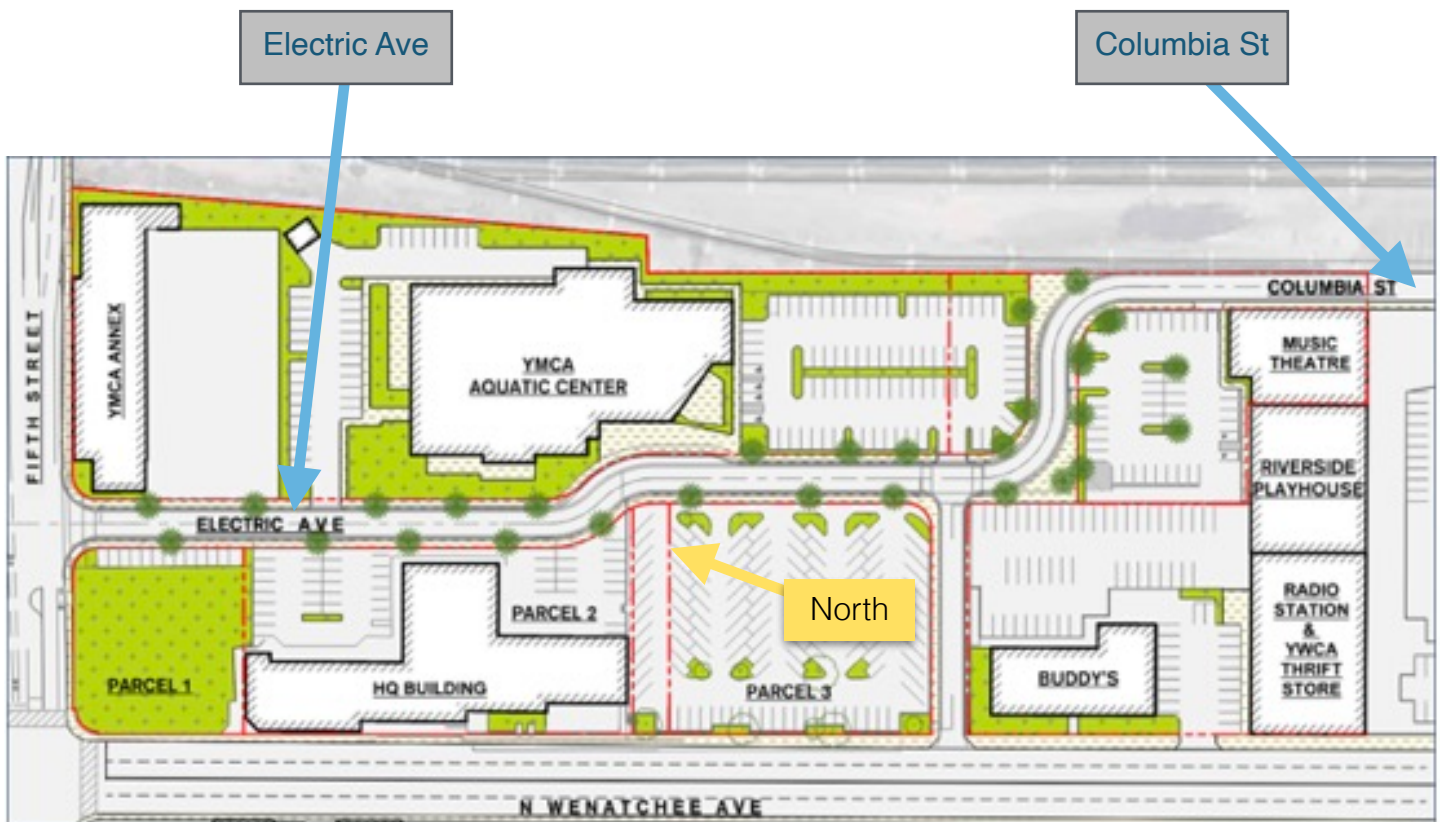


The "Reimagine Wenatchee" report by Northwest Studio (11-1-2023) built from public input, shows a conceptual image of a protected cycletrack on Columbia St (below). The image shows how motorized traffic, bicycles, and pedestrians would all share the public right of way.

It's been a wait of 27 years since GWBAB suggested adopting a north-south route to bicycle through downtown Wenatchee. Finally a proposal has emerged that has some likelihood to become part of an adopted city plan.



A front page article in the Wenatchee World (5-9-2024) describes the northern end of the proposed Columbia St - Electric Ave corridor. The image (below) provided by Chelan County PUD, has more to do with the PUD helping assist with a smooth transition from PUD headquarters to a brand new YMCA. As such, the author of the article did not discuss specific plans for how the new Electric Ave will be utilized. The graphic does, however, add substance to the Northwest Studio proposal from 2023 for a new road connecting Kittitas St to Fifth St through downtown Wenatchee via Columbia St and Electric Ave. Laine Heikel, Senior PUD Project Manager, explained PUD's desire to provide a smooth transition from a PUD campus to a new YMCA. As such, Electric Ave from Fifth St to connect to Columbia St near Second St is to be a piece of the legacy left by the PUD. The graphic shows a label for Columbia St just east of the Music Theater. For accuracy, the Columbia St label actually belongs south of the PUD campus.



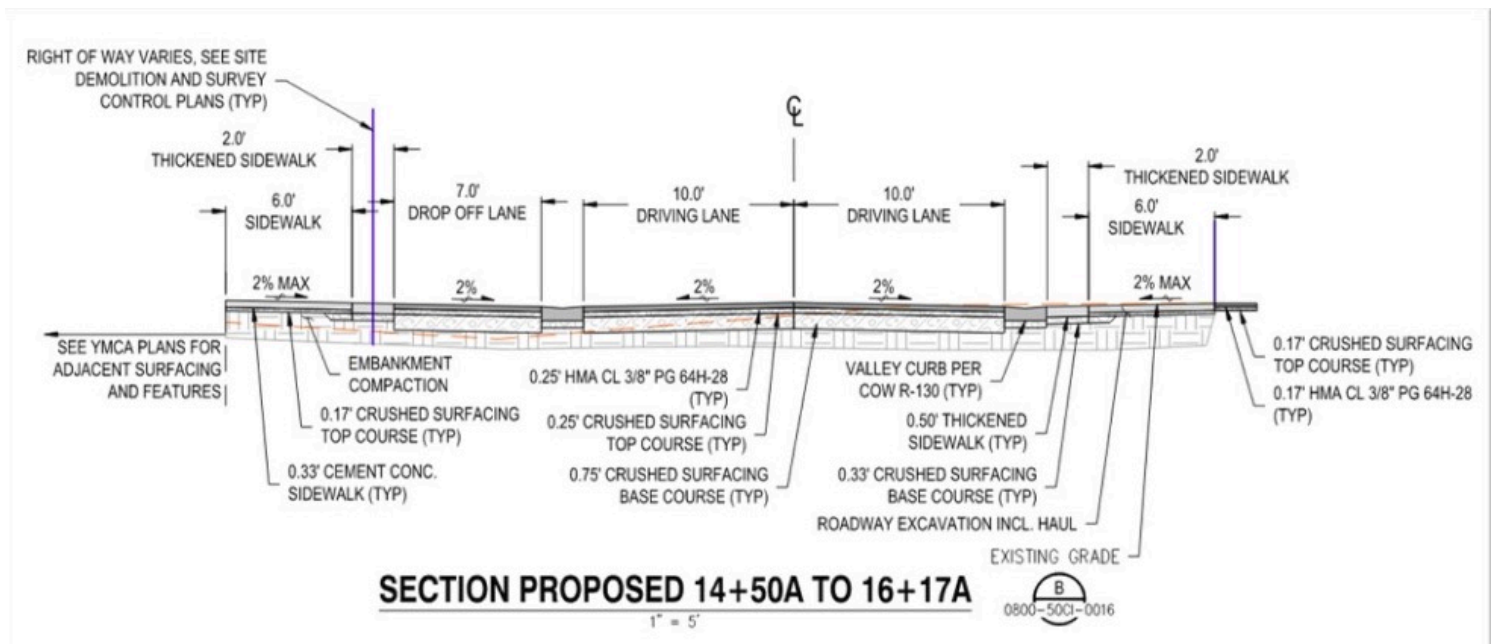
This image shows the site plan for the former Chelan County PUD headquarters at Wenatchee Avenue and Fifth Street.

Provided image/Chelan County PUD

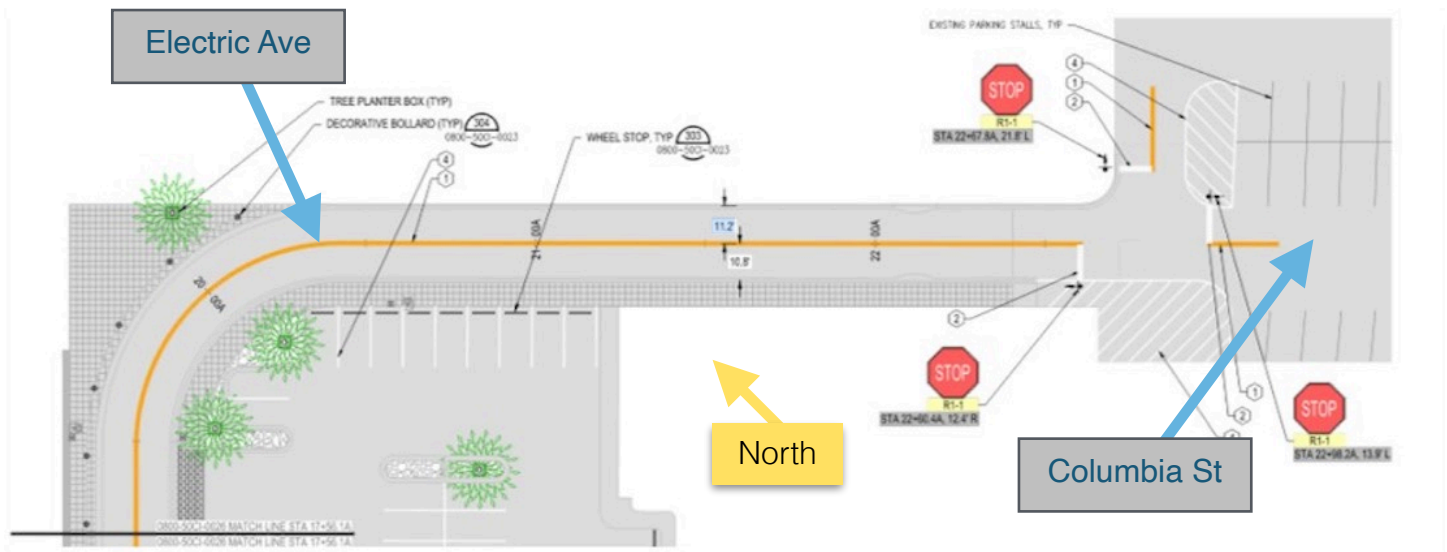
A graphic supplied by Chelan Count PUD and originating with RH2 Engineering (below) shows a cross section envisioning Electric Ave. Six foot wide sidewalks are on either side of two driving lanes, each lane ten feet wide. Notable is the absence of any bicycling treatment such as cycle track or bike lanes. Heikel explained that the available right of way to place a road south of Fifth St is very limited, hence the lack of space for separate bike lanes. A speed limit of 20 mph is envisioned.

From a bicycling perspective there is an odd feel to the current proposals, that of having a cycle track for a five block section of Columbia St north of Kittitas St, then having no bicycling designation for the remainder of the distance to Fifth St. Laura Gloria, City of Wenatchee Executive Services Director, asked me to be open minded, that Electric Ave was "designed with pedestrian and bicycle safety as the priorities. While the design does not include bike lanes, the entire concept of the project was meant to prioritize these uses. The curb-less design, bollards, and limited striping are all design aspects that contribute to that environment."

Treatments for bicycling other than bike lanes that are perhaps better known in the past are: placing bike sharrows on the road surface; and bike route signs. These treatments are not likely to be used on Electric Ave. Old school or new school, Electric Ave is coming, and we will bicycle it.



A more detailed drawing (below) supplied by the PUD (RH2 Engineering) shows the vision for how Electric Ave will connect with Columbia St. At present Columbia St ends at Second St, with a parking lot extending to the north. The drawing shows Columbia St extending through the parking lot to where it joins with Electric Ave.



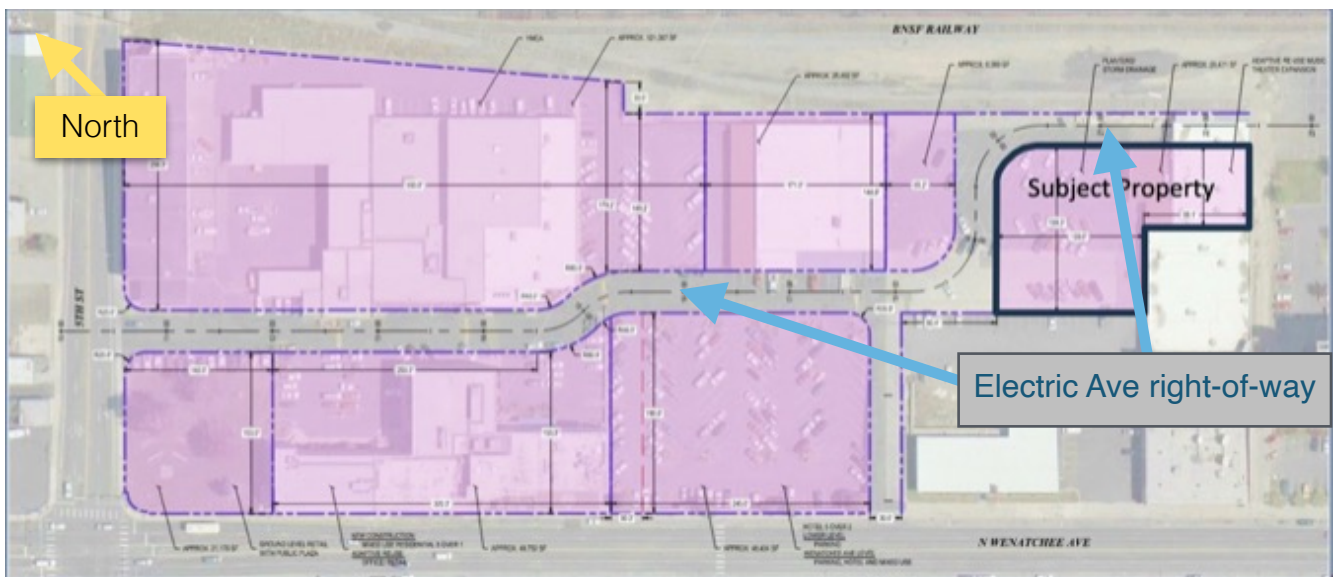
Looking north from the intersection of Columbia St and Second St (below), is the driveway heading into the parking lot of the Coast Wenatchee Center Hotel. It is convenient for future plans that the driveway and parking lot are owned by the City of Wenatchee. This is envisioned as an extension of Columbia St, to connect with Electric Ave at the north end of the parking lot.



Looking north from the north edge of the Coast Wenatchee Center Hotel parking lot (below), it is difficult to envision Electric Ave going anywhere. In the background is the back side of the PUD Fish & Wildlife building. Heikel noted that a portion of the structure will be torn down to make way for Electric Ave. The actual connection will be closer to the east side of the parking lot near the railroad tracks.

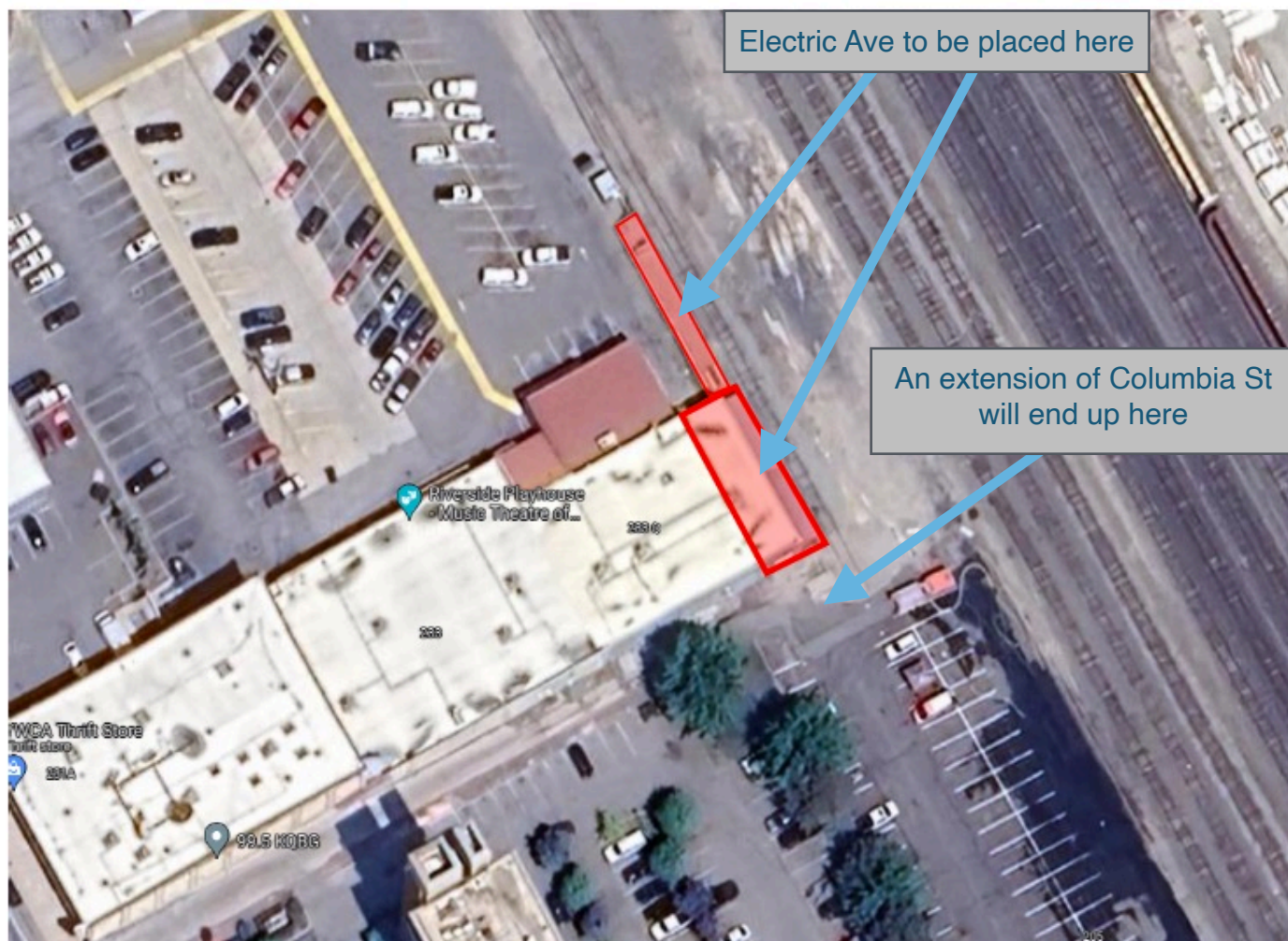


A PUD report (6-3-2024) credited to David Lodge, PUD Project Manager, mostly deals with negotiations with the Music Theater of Wenatchee. An image from the report (below) shows the Electric Ave concept, with a narrow right-of-way reaching the southern border of the former PUD complex. Implied is the connection with the City of Wenatchee property that is currently a parking lot behind the Coast Wenatchee Center Hotel.



Lodge provided additional documentation (6-13-2024) that marked more precisely where Electric Ave will be placed, and what portion of the Fish & Wildlife building will be removed to make way for a connection with Columbia St (below). The aerial view shows how Electric Ave will connect with the eastern most portion of the parking lot behind the Coast Wenatchee Center Hotel.

Proposed Building Demo for Electric Ave





The image (above) is looking north at the PUD F&W building, taken from the easternmost portion of the Coast Wenatchee Center Hotel parking lot. From this picture imagine the end of Electric Ave about where the large door is located, and an extension of Columbia St placed right in the middle of the parking lot corridor.

This image made me imagine Burlington Northern selling the right of way for a train track that probably sees little use, a move that could have made more room for Electric Ave. David Lodge said that the PUD made that overture, but BN was not receptive to the proposal.

Lodge (6-10-2024) explained that Electric Ave being on private land adds to the complexity of the project. Electric Ave being on private land will be constructed as a private right-of-way, but also shared with the community coming and going from either Fifth St or Columbia St. New property owners within the former PUD campus will share the cost of maintaining Electric Ave. While Electric Ave will be a PUD project, the PUD and City of Wenatchee have collaborated. For example, the City of Wenatchee has suggested that not having a center lane on Electric Ave would serve to slow down traffic to improve safety for bicyclists and pedestrians. Demolition of buildings coming down to make way for the YMCA is well underway, visible from where the future Electric Ave will be constructed (below).



Jeff Wilkens, Chelan Douglas Transportation Council Executive Director, provided analysis from his perspective (6-11-2024). The PUD's Electric Ave, being built as a privately owned right-of-way, can be built to different standards than Columbia St, which will be built based on a City of Wenatchee adopted plan on a public right-of-way. He noted that the curves of Electric Ave will slow down traffic. It's assumed that bicycling Electric Ave will be highly comfortable compared to bicycling the north-south parallel route of Wenatchee Ave.

Curbless Street Case Examples (Chapter One)



Georgetown, District of Columbia

photo source: Eric Fidler via Flickr
(CC BY-NC 2.0)

There are precedents for the type of streetscape the PUD envisions for Electric Ave. A street in Georgetown, Washington DC (above) has no curbs and a rough surface to slow traffic (Source: < <https://www.dvrpc.org/reports/16044.pdf> >). This style of streetscape has been placed in both major cities and smaller towns in America. Something similar (below) is in Ann Arbor, Michigan (Source: < <https://www.mlive.com/news/ann-arbor/2023/08/check-out-ann-arbors-new-curbless-state-street-now-open-to-traffic.html> >).

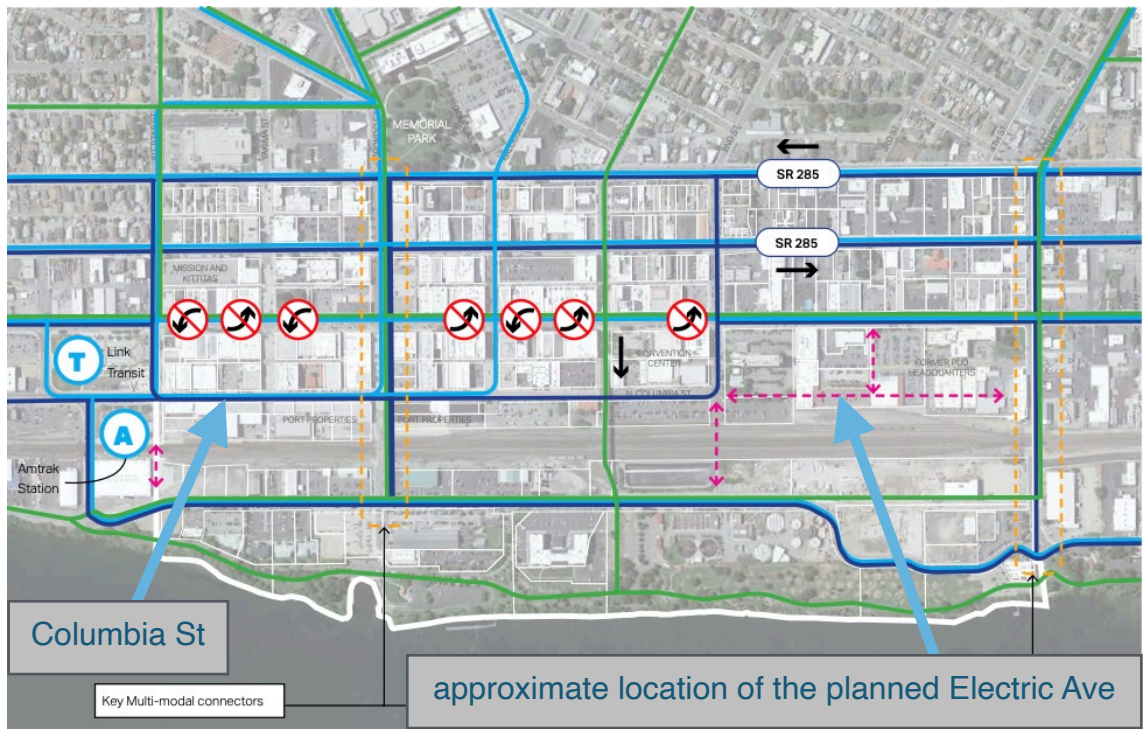


Bicyclists using Electric Ave will need to be alert to pedestrian traffic. If the curbless, more free-mix of autos, bicycles, and pedestrians has worked in other cities, it should work fine in Wenatchee.

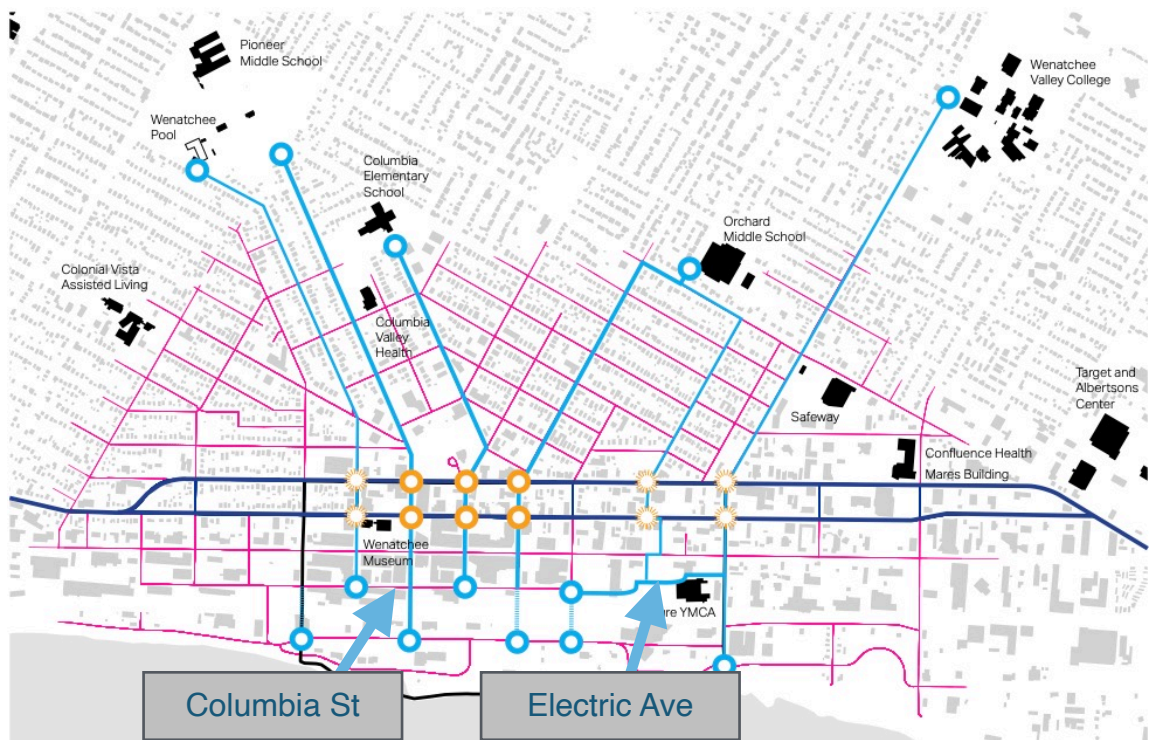


As a career transportation planner, Wilkens noted a future scenario of bicycle traffic southbound on the Loop Trail heading towards downtown Wenatchee will ride west on Fifth St to access Electric Ave. He worries a bit about bike travel on Fifth that will have to navigate three T intersections: Worthen St; Pierre St; and Electric Ave (above). Heading west on Fifth St and wanting to turn south onto Electric Ave, would there be enough road width on Fifth St for a left turn pocket? I did some unofficial measuring of Fifth St near the former PUD campus driveway and found the road width curb to curb to be 50-52 feet. This probe will fall into the City of Wenatchee's hands for future consideration.

A final report was recently presented to the City Council by Northwest Studio (7-18-2024). The dashed pink lines from page 10 (below) represent "missing network connectors." Included was the connection between Second St and Fifth St that is the PUD's Electric Ave.

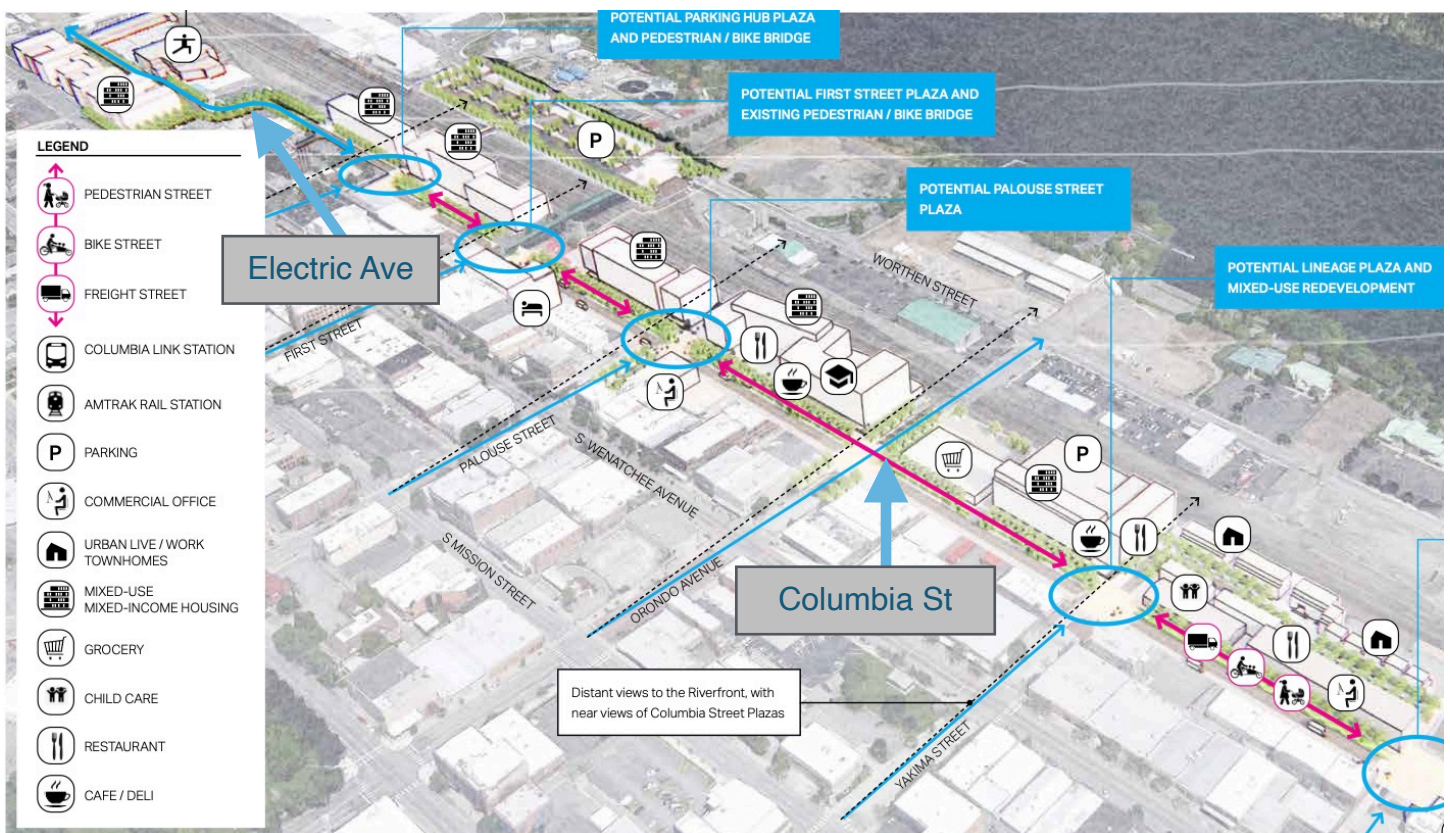


Northwest Studio (page 23) uses solid blue lines to denote "Key multi-modal street / recommended pedestrian and bicycle improvements." Included is a more precise positioning of Electric Ave (below).



Northwest Studio (page 29) suggests including "high quality ... bike infrastructure" for Columbia St (below) . By digging a little deeper, Northwest Studio could have highlighted the magnitude of what Columbia St and Electric Ave represent: the correction of a decades old deficiency in the bicycle infrastructure in Wenatchee by providing a designated bicycle route north-south through downtown.

Cherished public spaces are well-used because they work well for the communities they serve. A reimagined Columbia Street that maintains business-oriented flexible-use zones for vehicle loading and deliveries, together with public parking, while adding high-quality pedestrian and bike infrastructure, can help to transform a freight street into a great street - and anchor a new warehouse district.



Northwest Studio (page 40) depicts the entire length of the Columbia St - Electric Ave corridor (above) as a Bike Street. This image clearly notes that Columbia St - Electric Ave should be the future of bicycling north-south through downtown Wenatchee.

Northwest Studio (page 42) shows a vision of Columbia St that includes protected two-way bike lanes (below).



Northwest Studio (page 52) prepared some funding estimates for individual parts of the suggested projects for the City of Wenatchee to consider (below). At \$20-24 million, a remake of Columbia St is no doubt an expensive project. City Council members have instructed the city to seek additional public input to consider the Northwest Studio proposals. No funding is currently in place for any changes to Columbia St. After a wait of 27 years one can be hopeful that the City of Wenatchee will adopt a plan which includes a bicycle route north-south through downtown Wenatchee. As engineers for the City of Wenatchee have noted over the years, a project never gets built unless it is part of an adopted plan.

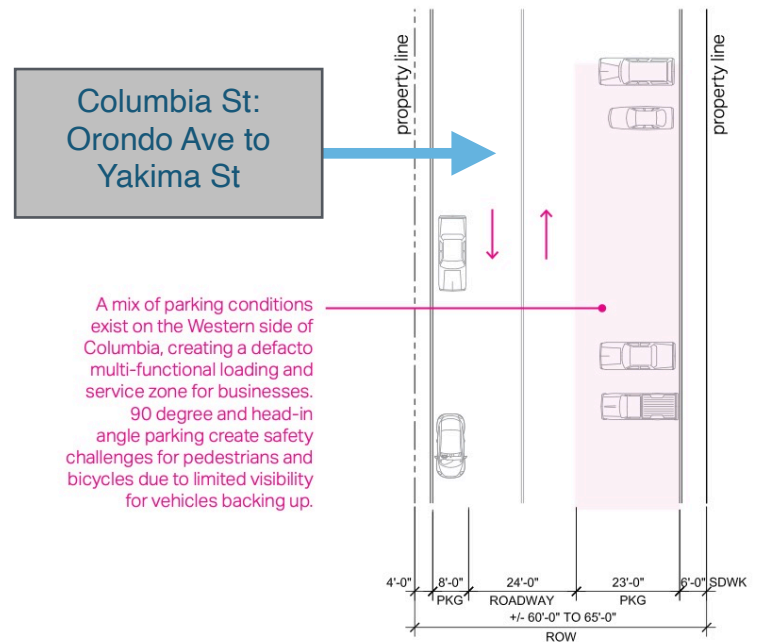
Summary of Budget Ranges and Funding Tools

	Project	Budget Range		Funding			
		Low	High	Federal	State	Local	Dedicated
1	Public realm improvements to Columbia Street	\$18.9m	\$24.2m	Limited Support	Limited Support	Focused	Focused
2	Traffic calming and pedestrian and bike improvements at key intersections at Mission and Chelan	\$5.1m	\$9.2m	Target Grants	Target Grants	Leverage	Leverage
3	Converting Mission and Chelan from a one-way to a two-way couplet	\$31.5m	\$78.2m	Target Grants	Target Grants	Leverage	Leverage
4	New pedestrian bridge over the BNSF rail corridor	\$5.2m	\$10.5m	Target Grants	Target Grants	Leverage	Focused

In all likelihood, Electric Ave will be finished before any adopted vision of Columbia St will be built. It's reasonable, as Jeff Wilkens has noted, that bicycle traffic will increase on Columbia St when Electric Ave is opened for use. Given that scenario, let's take a closer look at Columbia St heading south between Orondo Ave and Yakima St (right). Motor vehicles backing out of parking spots places bicyclists at risk. Bicycle sharrows placed out in the middle of the lane would guide a bicyclist to a safer place to ride, and also communicate to motor vehicle drivers where a bicyclist ought to be.

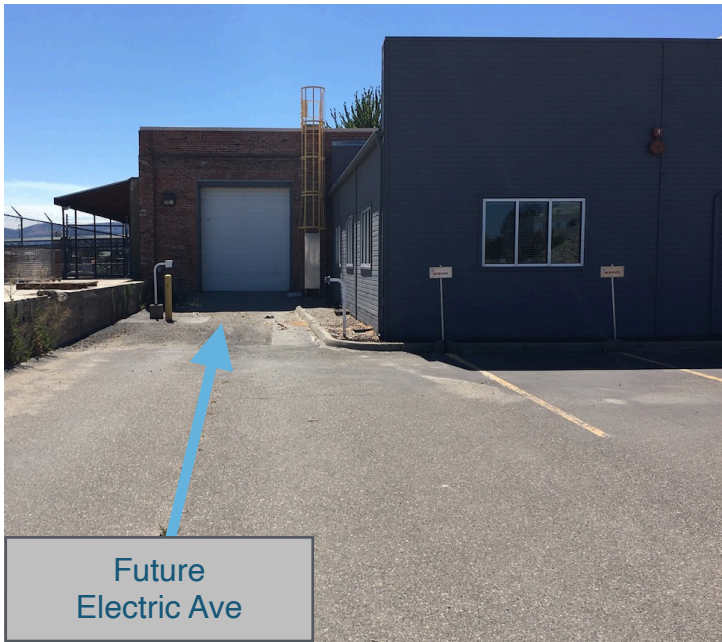


Northwest Studio (page 43) echo the risk of bicycling Columbia St in its present format (right): "safety challenges for ... bicycles due to limited visibility for vehicles backing up.



Columbia St southbound between Yakima St and Kittitas St (left), has back out diagonal parking, creating a similar risk for bicycling southbound. The last place a bicyclist should ride would be along the right edge of the traveled lane. Bike sharrows placed in the middle of the lane also make sense here to guide both bicyclists and motor vehicle drivers.

Meanwhile, demolition (7-24-2024) on the former Chelan County PUD campus moves forward (right). Electric Ave with PUD funding is expected to be built in phases in the next couple of years. The first phase will begin at Fifth St and end in the parking lot adjacent to Riverside Playhouse Theater.



The image (left) is looking south at the Fish and Wildlife Building from the Riverside Playhouse Theater parking lot. This is where Electric Ave will be placed after the eastern side of this building is removed.

Looking south into the former Chelan County PUD campus from Fifth St (right), one sees the approximate location of where Electric Ave will be placed.



In closing, previous city administrations have taken advice from the local bike board to designate a bike route north-south through downtown Wenatchee. When the bike board began in 1997, there was only one engineer on staff that supported the creation of bicycle infrastructure. That was followed by a lengthy period when the City of Wenatchee was mired in the Town Toyota Center funding debacle. A Central Business District plan in 2007 lacked the vision to consider using Columbia St as bicycle infrastructure. The Pybus Market dominated the city's planning before it opened in 2013. Prior to 2016 there was no official Complete Streets policy. The First St Bikeway in 2020 set precedents with the first protected bike lanes and bike boxes at intersections in Wenatchee. The current administration and city council has a unique opportunity to adopt a plan for Columbia St that will provide bicycle infrastructure to ride north-south through downtown Wenatchee.



Charles Hickenbottom is the author of Greater Wenatchee Bicycle Routes - A History Told Through Maps, Drawings, and Pictures. The book is available for purchase through the Wenatchee Valley Museum, with all proceeds from sales donated to the museum. The book can be checked out from North Central Washington Libraries. Hickenbottom served for 25 years on local bicycle advisory boards and committees. For two decades he commuted by bicycle to Lewis & Clark Elementary School from his home near Chase Park. Most of his errands and travel around town are done by bicycle. Since the completion of the book in 2022, Hickenbottom has completed several writing projects about various bicycling topics pertinent to Wenatchee, hosted by the Wenatchee Outdoors website. 7-25-2024