

DC Streetcar Extension Debate Nostalgic Gentrification As A Development Tool Vs. A More Practical And Budget Friendly Use of Circulator Buses

Transit Opinion by: Iris McCrea (Ward 7 Resident and Civic Association Member)

There are Ward 7 citizens on both sides of the debate on this proposed extension of the streetcar as a part of the **Benning Road Corridor Redevelopment Framework Plan.**

Thus, pushing forward socially distanced exchanges on media such as **Nextdoor and Community Blogs**; as well as in the meetings of the **Fort Dupont Civic Association** about the effect of the streetcar extension on the health and safety of the community; the budget for more needed community changes (specifically addressing the “Food Desert Crisis”); and funding for the pressing employment programs needed for the existing residents of the Ward.

The position of the Fort Dupont Civic Association is against the extension of the Streetcar beyond the Langston Golf Course at Oklahoma Avenue, NE to East Capitol Street and Benning Road NE. However, we do support transit-oriented development along Benning Road and through sub-neighborhoods from Oklahoma Avenue to Southern Avenue which is even beyond the proposed end of the streetcar route.

One of the recommendations in the **Redevelopment Framework Plan** as put forth by DDOT was to “Further analyze new transit modes along the corridor, particularly east of the Benning Road metro station, such as smaller neighborhood serving Circulator Buses.”

Such transit options will, help support new retail and housing development.” Since this has been considered in the plan, the Fort Dupont Civic Association strongly recommends the use of the Circulator Buses starting at Oklahoma Avenue instead of streetcars. Instead of a straight-line run from Oklahoma Avenue and Benning Road to East Capitol and Benning Road, the Circulator Bus route can take a route more convenient to people in the sub-neighborhoods as well as on Benning Road.

This option can benefit more people, particularly the elderly, by providing them access to markets, stores, and services that they need without having to walk blocks to get on a streetcar on Benning Road.

To further delineate this option, in the near future, a Circulator bus could run a route from Benning Road and Oklahoma Avenue to C Street, then to 17th Street, to E Street, to Hill East, around Stadium Armory to East Capitol Street, to Benning, and make a left turn onto Benning. After making the turn onto Benning Road, the Circulator can work its way through the neighborhood to 42nd Street and back to East Capitol and 40th Street.

The Circulator would go North on 40th pass East of the River Shopping Center to Benning Road. Then it would make its way West on Benning Road, making stops until it gets back to Oklahoma Avenue. The goal of using the Circulator Bus is to get closer to people to transport them to business Centers such as Hill East and East of the River businesses.

Of course, there may be more plausible routes, but the route described was an example of what could be a support for transit-oriented development.

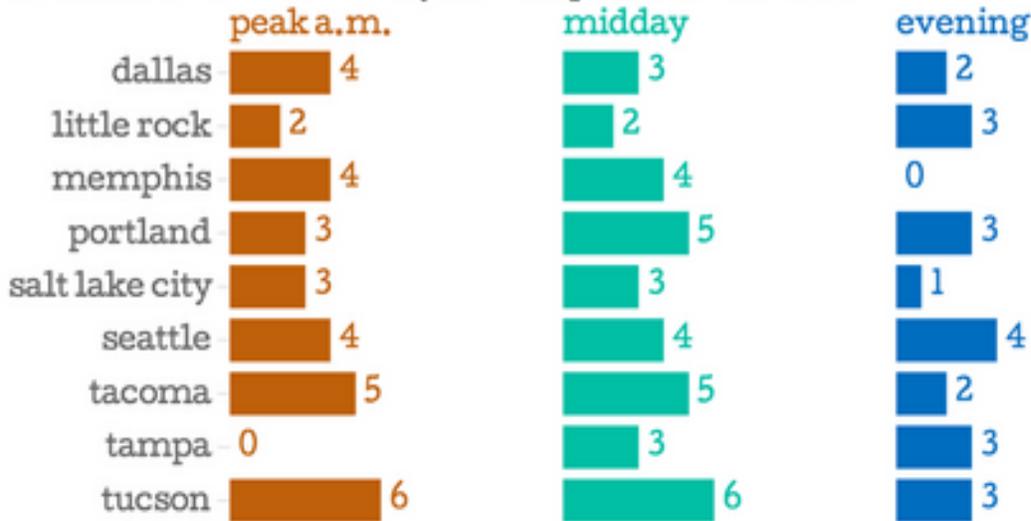
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Research on other cities that have incorporated the Streetcar into their Transit Plans unveiled a variety of problems with new streetcars. In the September 3, 2014 **Bloomberg CityLab** Eric Jaffe says that:

“the legacy system in New Orleans...places streetcars somewhat outside the transit network, more a tool for tourism than city mobility.” He further states that “The most commonly cited problem with new streetcars – Matt Yglesias calls it the ‘original sin’ – is that they tend to run in mixed traffic alongside cars. The resulting slow speeds, combined with the relatively short length of the lines (often just a mile or two), means many potential riders could sooner reach their destination by foot. Streetcar advocates say slow speeds are not only beside the point but part of the charm, which might be true, so long as riders don’t have somewhere to be.”

Jaffe also says that “Jonah Freemark lamented that many U.S. streetcar (and, to be fair, light rail) systems built since 2000 fail to meet minimal service standards—often running just a few times an hour.” The general minimum service standard in the U.S. for light rail transit is to run 4 times every hour. Below is the schematic that Freemark used to support his failure claims:

Streetcars Per Hour for Systems Opened Since 2000



SOURCE: Via Transport Politic

Based on this data, only one city's light rail system met that minimum standard for each of the periods daily - Seattle, Washington. Many opponents of the new light rail systems such as in

Atlanta, Georgia, know that operating in mixed traffic is a recipe for failure. Angie Schmitt, in *STREETSBLOG USA* (May 22, 2018) quotes Simon Berrebi at *Atlanta Magazine*:

"To relegate expensive transit infrastructure in mixed traffic means that trains will only go as fast as the cars around them. It's profoundly unfair that transit vehicles, which can carry a hundred times more people than private cars, can get stuck in the same congestion. And it doesn't make economic sense. As Georgia Tech professor Kari Watkins says: "When buses and trains are mixed in with general traffic, there is no incentive for people to chose transit." And if they instead opt to drive themselves, streets will get more congested, air more polluted, and way more deadly.

Since that is a probability, proper construction of a track lane for the streetcar would require taking eminent domain of property more than just the sidewalks so that regular Metro buses have a travel lane during peak and midday hours; cars have a lane; and bicycles have a lane. That's going to take away egress to and from newly constructed buildings, the library, the funeral home, a church, and existing businesses. Do we really want to do that?

Some may say that using a Circulator Bus would mean more pollution. But now that solar powered - hybrid city buses exist, using them will save thousands of dollars that would be spent on all electric fuel because it can run on both 'Solar power and electric charged batteries. During the night or on cloudy days this (solar) stored energy is used. In case there is not enough energy stored, the buses will be able to stop at a local gas station that will (at this point) be equipped with a bus charging station. The benefits of hybrid buses are lower emissions, increased efficiency and decreased maintenance.

Solar Powered Bus



Other Benefits

If charging stations and desks are added to the buses, people could work on their way to and from work. This could be very beneficial to many people. Suppose, a person needed to charge a phone or laptop battery on the way to their destination. It could easily be charged by a solar powered charging station.

The average price of a 40-foot hybrid bus typically ranges from \$450,000 - \$550,000 when compared to the reported cost of Milwaukee's streetcar will cost \$64.6 million for around 2 miles of track. Cincinnati's line, proposed in 2007, was estimated to cost between \$133 million and \$148 million. In Atlanta, the \$99 million streetcar line operates in mixed traffic on a short 2.6-mile route in the downtown area. The Atlanta streetcar operations was set at \$2.6 million, but now (as reported by WSB-TV) is projected to cost \$4.4 million annually. Graham Renz on August 30, 2016 (Show Me Institute) says that the proposed expansion of the Kansas City's streetcar is expected to cost an estimated \$227million (in 2019 dollars).



Based on the information recovered about other streetcar systems weighed against the dire needs of Ward 7 and the limited rewards of a streetcar extension, it is certain that Ward 7 citizens should be for a more practical use of funds rather than extending the streetcar - a nostalgic gentrification effort.

References

- <https://planning.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/op/publication/attachments/comb2benning.pdf>

The plan was approved on July 15, 2008 through Resolution 17-0879. Archival information on the public engagement process, hearing transcript, and public comment responses can be requested through the project manager.

- <http://solarbuses.weebly.com/solar-city-bus.html>
- <https://usa.streetsblog.org/2017/03/09/atlantas-streetcar-investment-is-not-paying-off/>
- <https://ddot.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ddot/publication/attachments/2014%20DC%20Circulator%20Transit%20Development%20Plan%20Update%20Report.pdf>
- <https://usa.streetsblog.org/2018/05/22/will-atlanta-double-down-on-its-streetcar-mistake/>
- <https://georgiapolicy.org> “ Atlanta Streetcar Costs: Up, Up and Away”