

Dear Waterfront Futures Group:
Mason Adair

I reviewed the list of white paper topics on waterfrontfutures.org and have decided to jump on the 'streetcar-bandwagon' by sending this article to you. I hope you don't mind, but in lieu of a whitepaper, I have also taken the opportunity to offer my opinion to the waterfront futures group below.

http://www.spokanejournal.com/spokane_id=article&sub=1700

ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS

"One thing we learned was that a streetcar, more than light rail and certainly more than buses, is two-thirds about economic development and is one-third about transportation."

"... the Federal Transit Administration,... is considering developing a program that would support development of streetcar systems in U.S. cities."

"The fixed-rail configuration provides a measure of permanence allowing investors to make more significant investment decisions than they could otherwise"

IMPLICATIONS FOR BELLINGHAM

Spokane is studying feasibility and at some point, as most tier 1 cities in the state roll out tram systems, it becomes almost compulsory for a city of our caliber to do the same. Portland, Tacoma, Seattle, and now Spokane have realized that infrastructure - of which a modern tram system is a highly visible piece - is an important criteria by which business investors, transplants, and tourists measure a city. I believe that Bellingham should study a similar system, but not a carbon copy of what is being done elsewhere. With enough public input and consideration of the city's history, Bellingham could develop a streetcar system that does not come across as a 'me-too' project, but adds to our unique character and is uniquely Bellingham. Beyond encouraging business, tourism and investment, there are several reasons (many suggested by white paper contributors) that a tram system starter line should be considered and funded for initial study:

Recent streetcar projects in the NW have been less political / more successful than larger light-rail initiatives. With several NW cities complete or under study, this is not uncharted territory - cost and risk are lower The region's knowledge base on the technologies and construction techniques is deep and up-to-date Bellingham's demographics and general political temperament suggest the receptiveness of such a system Right-of-way exists on streets & along the waterfront and might be acquired easily There has been grassroots support of various incarnations of a streetcar system for several years. Such a system would reinforce the city's values of eco-conscious development and superior public access. Streetcars are a link to Bellingham's history and some rails are still visible. A waterfront line would facilitate access to many of the city's most important destinations. A Federally funded system could bring jobs and money to the city.

Thank you,
Mason Adair

Fixed-rail streetcars mulled

Feasibility study to explore funding sources, including local, state, federal coffers

By [Megan Cooley](#)

Three groups have teamed up to study the feasibility of bringing fixed-rail streetcars back to downtown Spokane.

The study's supporters—the Downtown Spokane Partnership, the Spokane Regional Transportation Council, and the Spokane Transit Authority—say the proposal is preliminary. As it's envisioned, though, modern-looking streetcars one day could circulate passengers through downtown and into neighboring districts, says Michael Edwards, president of the Downtown Spokane Partnership.

Such a system could spur business development along the rail lines, which has been the result in Portland, Ore., where a streetcar system was built three years ago, he says.

“The fixed-rail configuration provides a measure of permanence allowing investors to make more significant investment decisions” than they could otherwise, Edwards said in a statement issued by the three organizations last week.

The study will consider a streetcar system that would circulate people throughout downtown and to outlying destinations such as the Spokane Veterans Memorial Arena, Riverpoint Higher Education Park, South Hill medical district, and Browne's Addition.

Glenn Miles, SRTC transportation manager, says it usually costs about \$12 million a mile to build a fixed-rail streetcar system. If Spokane decided to pursue such a project, it could seek funds from the Federal Transit Administration, which is considering developing a program that would support development of streetcar systems in U.S. cities.

The city of Portland funded its streetcar system through a variety of sources, including through tax-increment financing, local improvement districts, and local-option taxes, but Miles says the Spokane groups won't know whether such an approach would be used here until the study is completed. Likewise, the study will explore the possibility of tapping into city, state, and STA funds. “The whole question is still wide open,” Miles says.

Funds also could come from the private sector or from a combination of both private and public sources, Edwards said in a follow-up interview. The Federal Transit Administration's involvement would depend on funding from the reauthorization of a federal transportation bill. Congress is slated to take up the bill, on which several projects here are hinging, during its fall session, but Miles says he doesn't expect the package to be finalized until next spring.

Charles Hales, the Portland-based vice president of transit planning for the architectural and engineering firm HDR Inc., spoke in Spokane last week at a meeting about the proposed project. He told an audience of about 100 people here that more than \$1 billion has been invested in businesses along Portland's streetcar route, Edwards says.

Miles says the meeting was a positive kickoff of the feasibility study. His organization is the lead agency on the study, although the downtown partnership first proposed the idea.

“I think there's a lot of interest in how something like a streetcar would fit into Spokane,” he says. Edwards says the physical fit, at least, wouldn't be a problem here.

“The streetcar, because of its size, fits into the urban fabric,” he says. “Cars and fixed rail would operate in the same space. The streetcar doesn't dominate a street; it removes very little parking; and the customer access is very, very easy.”

The streetcars the groups are proposing for consideration have entry doors that are low to the ground, so passengers can walk on without having to take much of a step up. While some cities

operate nostalgic-looking streetcars, the groups here are proposing that Spokane consider installing modern-looking streetcars, Edwards says.

“Hales called the nostalgic streetcars ‘transpertainment,’” Edwards says. “In other words, it’s almost like a (carnival) ride. It doesn’t attract a business rider going through life function.” Portland’s fixed-rail line uses modern-looking streetcars on the weekdays to cater to commuters and nostalgic-looking ones on weekends to attract tourists, Edwards says.

The Portland streetcars run between the neighborhoods of Northwest Portland to an area about 15 blocks away called the Pearl District. Both areas are close to downtown Portland and have evolved into bustling commercial and residential centers in recent years, especially for young professionals. Edwards says about 6,000 people ride the Portland streetcars a day, which is up 30 percent to 40 percent from the project’s first year of operation.

Studying the feasibility of building a fixed-rail streetcar system here will take six months to a year, he says, and comments are encouraged from downtown business owners and the community. Further project details, such as how many cars would operate in the system and when the project would be built, will be determined in the study, Edwards says. Several public meetings will be held, and a steering committee is forming to head up the effort, he says. If the study shows that such a project is viable here, the groups would seek conceptual-design funds as their next step, Miles says.

One piece of puzzle

The study’s supporters say the proposed streetcar project wouldn’t displace another project proposed here: building a light-rail line that would connect downtown to Spokane Valley and Liberty Lake. It also has been suggested that instead of light rail, those centers be connected with an express bus service called bus rapid transit.

Rather than working against the light-rail or express-bus effort, the streetcar project would complement whatever type of system is developed, says Mary Ann Ulik, the Downtown Spokane Partnership’s director of parking and operations. “It’s intended as part of a larger transportation system,” she says. “Buses, streetcars, and light rail would work together as a whole system. One doesn’t replace another.”

Ulik says she envisions passengers getting on the streetcars, traveling several blocks, hopping off to do some shopping, and jumping on again to move to another part of town, to their places of work, to restaurants, or to their homes. Edwards adds, “One thing we learned (from Hales) was that a streetcar, more than light rail and certainly more than buses, is two-thirds about economic development and is one-third about transportation.”

Meanwhile, the idea of using light rail or bus rapid transit to link downtown to the Valley is inching ahead, Miles says. Meetings—aimed at determining what the minimum length and location of the downtown-to-Valley line would be if the entire envisioned project could not be completed—were expected to be held this week, he says. That project also depends on the federal transportation package, though.

Spokane had a fixed-rail streetcar system downtown for about the first three decades of the 20th century, says Mike Brewer, a former Spokane city councilman whose father worked for the Spokane Transit Authority and its predecessor organizations. The tracks were removed in the mid-1930s when the city began to use buses for mass transit, he says. Before that, though, the tracks crossed the river on the Monroe Street bridge and again on their own thin trestle parallel to the Post Street Bridge.