

Streetcar Desire

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It could be “back to the future” for L.A. transit.

A group of property owners, developers, and civic and political leaders has been quietly pushing to revive a scaled-down version of L.A.'s famed Red Cars in the downtown area.

The group, which formed a non-profit called Los Angeles Streetcar Inc. in January, sees the electric trolley line as a logical step for downtown, which has undergone a revival as a commercial and residential hub. The idea is to help the area's workers and thousands of new residents get around while bringing businesses more patrons. Supporters optimistically hope to have the \$100 million system up and running within five years.

“It would be really great for downtown,” said Dennis Allen, the group's executive director, who also manages real estate development firm Urban One. “You can ride the bus, subway, light rail or car to downtown, but once you get there, how do you get around? This solves the problem of that last quarter-mile of transportation.”

The proposal – which some critics have called unrealistic and of limited use – may not be as far-fetched as it sounds. In recent years, both Portland, Ore., and Seattle have built downtown trolleys with financing from public and private sources.

The proposal already has drawn support from downtown's representatives on the Los Angeles City Council, as well as at least \$5 million in funding from the Community Redevelopment Agency. Supporters also said they have raised about \$100,000 in private money.

Still, that is just a drop in the bucket compared with the cost of building the system and the estimated \$5 million annually it would take to run. And with fare revenue uncertain – ideas range from making it free to charging as much as \$1.50 a ride – supporters are looking to raise the rest through special business assessment districts, and a combination of private and public funding, including federal stimulus dollars.

Already, the city redevelopment agency approved an allocation of \$400,000 to begin creating a local business assessment district that could cover as much as 50 percent of the cost.

“We see this as a major catalyst as downtown moves forward,” said Curt Gibbs, a senior resource development officer for the CRA who's been working on the project. “When you put rails in the street, what you have is a downtown circulator that future development can key itself off.”

Seeking to gather public support, Los Angeles Streetcar is holding a meeting at 4 p.m. Wednesday at the Bradbury Building to gather public comments on proposed routes.

Possible lines

Los Angeles Streetcar recently unveiled three possible loop routes on the group's Web site.

Each of the three is about 3.5 miles in length and traverses most of Broadway from First Street moving south. Two of the routes would turn right on Pico Boulevard and eventually circle back along Hill Street, while the third would go as far as 11th Street before weaving back on Olive Street.

The plan is a much more modest version of the historic Red Car, operated by Pacific Electric, which by the 1920s had developed into one of the largest streetcar systems in the world. It carried passengers throughout downtown and to other cities, including Burbank, Long Beach and even Riverside. However, by 1961, with the advent of Southern California's massive freeway system, the trolley withered and was shut down.

The new streetcars would have some similarities. Like the Red Cars of old, they would ride on a rail powered by an electric cable connected to an overhead line. Plans are for a system consisting of at least seven cars, carrying about 150 passengers each, that would make frequent stops along the way allowing pedestrians to hop on and off.

But unlike the Red Car, the rails would be built at the side rather than in the middle of the road.

"It will have less impact on traffic, because automobiles can drive over the tracks when the streetcars aren't there," Allen said.

Despite the seeming obstacles in building the line – from constructing it on busy downtown streets to clearing various regulatory hurdles – the local nature of the project requires it to only receive City Council approval. It also would have to meet state and federal environmental laws, the latter necessary because of the desire to access federal stimulus funding.

Operations of the system would be contracted out, Allen said, with potential candidates to include the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority, a streetcar system builder or some other private contractor.

Construction would not begin until all funds are secured, which supporters hope will be no later than 2012. It would take about two years to build the line.

Connected supporters

Getting the necessary funding appears to be one of the biggest, obstacles. But the project has some high-profile supporters, including area City Councilman Jose Huizar, who considers it an "economic development driver." Councilwoman Jan Perry, whose district includes other portions of downtown, agrees.

"I think it's a great idea," she said. "It would enhance the immediate neighborhoods, become a really lovely tourist attraction grounded in historic fact and connect the various neighborhoods that make up downtown."

Also on board are various business owners, including Michael Delijani, who is on the board of the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council and whose family business has several local movie theaters.

"It can greatly enhance local businesses such as tourism, shopping, office use, hotel accommodation, the Convention Center and the connection between the different entertainment centers," he said.

Still, other business owners would have to be convinced. Allen said an earlier assessment district, District A1, raised \$124 million for four downtown subway stations – the Union, Civic Center, Pershing Square and Seventh Street stations – by charging businesses located within a half-mile of each station.

That district, created in 1992, will expire Dec. 31, opening the way for what streetcar planners hope will be a new, smaller assessment district contributing up to 50 percent of the project's costs.

Carol Schatz, president of both business advocacy group the Central City Association and the Downtown Center Business Improvement District, said she believes most downtown business owners would gladly help pay for the streetcar provided that it generates enough economic benefit to justify an assessment.

"Specifically, it will continue to spur economic growth downtown as it has in other cities, most notably Portland – if the route is properly drawn, it will do that," said Schatz, who called the proposal an "absolutely wonderful" idea.

Supporters frequently cite Portland's system, which began operating an 8-mile continuous-loop downtown streetcar system in 2001. The streetcars carry loads of up to 140 passengers each, making stops every three to four blocks.

Not everyone, however, agrees the comparison is valid.

Sam Staley, author of a book on transportation solutions, and director of urban growth and land-use policy for L.A. think tank the Reason Foundation, believes that streetcars have limited use. "The problem," he said, "is

they're slow.

"I don't think people are going to invest in a new office building just because there's a streetcar running by it," he said. "Streetcars are for people who don't have to worry about making appointments on time. But as a real mobility option, they're very limited. In most cases it would be faster to go by taxi or car."

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