



## Dude, Where's My (Street)car?

Many urban transportation historians point to Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia's successful campaign to rid New York City and its boroughs of the streetcar as one of the key turning points in crippling public transportation across the country. It set a trend that made eschewing streetcars a trendy thing to do. He was heard to comment that streetcars were as obsolete as the sailing ship, perhaps reflecting his drive to banish any "relics" from the city that reminded him of the "old country" (LaGuardia was an immigrant himself). Well, sixty-five years after the demise of the last streetcar in New York City, I can confidently report that the streetcar (and its similarly healthy big brother, light rail) are doing just fine.

Take France for example. Since 1985, new urban tramways have been opened in twenty-two French cities (with an additional five systems to open over the next five years). Many of these have expanded their systems and three new systems opened in 2012. The French tram systems also have many characteristics of light rail systems, including the general requirement to provide exclusive rights-of-way for trams except at intersections. The French took the lessons of the oil shortages of 1973 and 1979 to heart and adopted a long term strategy to improve mobility choices for French urbanites and provide a high quality, viable alternative to the automobile. Their overarching objective was to create healthy, pleasant, attractive urban environments where short trips could access jobs, education, recreation, retail activity and health facilities without relying on the automobile. These systems were also designed with connectivity to other modes in mind. Each system (except Brest) has easy access to the local train station and expanding travel options (including high speed rail).

Now shift to the United States. It may be surprising to some but American cities have built 20 new light rail systems since 1981. Click below on our website for the details:

<http://www.theamericanconservative.com/cpt/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/New-Light-Rail-Systems-in-the-US-Since-1981.xls>

In almost all cases, these new systems have been successful, registering steady ridership gains and pressure to extend into areas not yet served.

Now enters the streetcar. To date, a total of nine (9) new streetcar systems are under construction (and one extension to an existing streetcar system) and firm plans for a further ten (10) streetcar projects are progressing across the country. This has sparked the usual hue and cry from the naysayers. They blare that streetcars are obsolete and they get in the way of automobiles (and slow down traffic), and are expensive. But, maybe, just maybe, streetcars reflect and address the trends that many have detected across the country. The outward migration of people and their cars into the suburbs appears to have been slowed and actually reversed in some cases. Young people and young families are moving back into the city, drawn by the attraction of being in close proximity to their jobs, being able to walk to shopping, entertainment and recreation, and (in some cities like Portland, OR and Seattle, WA) take a short streetcar ride to these destinations. Survey after survey has revealed that many people are making the calculation that rather than spending two hours in their cars commuting, they want to move closer to jobs, recreation, shopping and the like in urban centers and have more time to spend with their families and enjoy other pursuits. To our delight, we conservatives (along with a large contingent of other different political persuasions) are finding that streetcars bring economic development, reinforce walkable environments, and encourage and cement cohesive neighborhoods. It should also be noted that where streetcars are popular, so are biking and walking (and walkable environments). As an added bonus, streetcars also end up helping reduce our over-dependence on foreign oil by reducing the need to hop in the car for trivial journeys.

It is also interesting to note the emerging trends that a number of studies have validated. These studies find that Americans are driving less (down 9% since 2008) and that many young Americans are not getting drivers licenses (In 2010, 26% of young Americans do not have a drivers licenses versus 21% some 10 years earlier). This latter trend says that many young people are forgoing owning an automobile, an increasingly expensive proposition (it now costs about \$8,000 a year to own and maintain an automobile).

Yale Professor Robert Spiller was recently quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* as saying that “Young people don’t read newspapers, they don’t have landline phones and maybe they won’t buy suburban houses anymore.”

The same article noted that the Chairman of the Federal Reserve, Benjamin Bernanke, who is feverishly trying to revive the American economy through overworked printing presses, has commented a number of times that there are some things even aggressive monetary policy can't change. The age of social media (smart phones, i-pads, tablets, texting, twitter, Facebook and the like) has diminished young people's need for an automobile, indeed to see the automobile as a rite of passage.

It is against the backdrop of these developments that projects such as the 37 mile streetcar system proposed for the District of Columbia and the Columbia Pike Streetcar in Arlington are being promoted by local officials. Both the DC and Arlington projects are squarely aimed at this market and are well positioned to capitalize on the streetcar's strengths. As the urban core continues its transformation, quality transportation as provided by the streetcar will become even more important.

It is interesting to note that in a recent US News and World Report list of 'The Ten Best Cities for Public Transportation' in the U.S., nine of those cities have rail transit service (and the 10<sup>th</sup> is building an automated rail system). And seven of these cities are either operating, constructing or planning streetcar systems. Coincidence? I don't think so.

Today's opponents of streetcars clearly have a well-"oiled" ax to grind. Otherwise, why would they rely on obfuscating strategies rooted in misinformation? Why else do we get titles such as 'The Streetcar Swindle' and 'The Great Streetcar Conspiracy,' hyperbolic titles saturated with fear of a future that won't benefit entrenched interests? And finally, why do we get desperate "hail Mary" passes to derail the Pike Streetcar with suspect claims that opponents are simply doing everyone a favor?

With all the compelling evidence that urban centers across America are undergoing dramatic change, it's time to make sure that the venerable Streetcar has clear sailing to a better future.

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*A modified version of this article is posted on the Center's website.  
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