

THE BOND BUYER

DC Looks At Streetcar

Kyle Glazier | September 6, 2012

WASHINGTON - Engineering, project finance, rail construction, and transit operation firms in the U.S. and four countries have expressed interest in helping the District of Columbia develop a planned 22-mile streetcar system, district Department of Transportation officials announced this week.

DDOT received 20 responses from firms in China, Spain, Great Britain and Japan, as well as the U.S., to its June 26 request for information, agency spokesman Dara Ward said in a release.

The submissions are not formal proposals to operate the DC Streetcar project and the local Circulator bus system, as a public-private partnership, Ward said, though a DDOT release indicated that the agency solicited the responses "in an effort to explore the potential of entering into a public-private partnership."

DDOT would not identify the firms that responded to the district's request, according to Ward.

"The response far exceeded our expectations," DDOT director Terry Bellamy said in a statement. "This level of response is indicative of the broad interest and promising nature of the project. It is a unique opportunity to provide premium transit services to the district."

The project would represent a streetcar revival in the district, which phased them out in favor of buses 50 years ago.

Other cities have gone back to streetcars in recent years, with bond-financed networks now operating in Portland, Ore. and Tampa, Fla., among other places. New or expanded streetcar networks, including P3s, also have been discussed in cities like San Antonio, Tex. and Los Angeles, Calif.Â

The streetcar revival has met with some criticism, though: Randal O'Toole of the libertarian Cato Institute issued a scathing report earlier this year blasting streetcars as an antiquated technology less efficient than buses.

But the DC Streetcar project's web site says that "unlike buses," streetcars "have

demonstrated they can be catalysts to attract investments in housing, retail and commercial properties."

District officials have said that streetcars will be in demand for travel between neighborhoods, as opposed to the regional travel for which the Washington Area Metropolitan Transit Authority's Metrorail system was designed.

DDOT is aiming for the first segment of the streetcar line, under construction and running along H Street and Benning Road near Union Station, to open sometime during the second half of 2013. The plan envisions a line, which has been estimated to cost \$200 million, eventually running the length of the district, from Georgetown in the west to Anacostia in the east.

"The next step in the process is to review the submissions," said DDOT chief engineer Ronaldo Nicholson. "We will use the information to help advance our planning and development efforts, likely resulting in a request for qualifications notice later this year."

DDOT will review the submissions over the next two months, the agency said.