

## National streetcar debate hits Gainesville

By Christopher Curry Friday, May 3, 2013

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The bold blue and orange bus travels back and forth continually on the roughly two-mile stretch between the University of Florida Reitz Union and downtown Gainesville.

On a sweltering, sticky North Central Florida afternoon, the inside of the air-conditioned hybrid bus is cool and comfortable.

On this day, the bus picks up about 10 passengers during a single trip west along Southwest Second Avenue from downtown to campus.

This is Gainesville Regional Transit System's Route 46 or, in local transit lingo, the UF-downtown circulator.

For RTS, the UF-funded route, which costs about \$196,000 annually, is a test of the effectiveness and ridership of a circulator making frequent short trips between downtown and campus. Right now, it averages 37 passengers an hour, RTS spokesman Chip Skinner said.

The City Commission is mulling whether to make a far more substantial, long-term investment in a far more permanent circulator — a streetcar system with electric vehicles running along steel rails laid on city streets. The streetcars would link UF, Shands at UF, the Malcom Randall VA Medical Center, the Power District, downtown and several million square feet of development planned in Innovation Square.

Right now, the city is in negotiations with a consultant to perform a study — at a cost of as much as \$100,000 — looking at the feasibility, economic development impact, financing and other aspects of such a system. Early, pre-design cost projections are \$128 million for construction.

It's early in the game, but already the nationwide debate on the modern streetcar has hit Gainesville.

In emails, commissioners have met frequent criticism for spending money to study the potential for a streetcar system.

"Repair our roads and forget trying to implement a 'big city' transportation system that can't be supported financially," one resident wrote in an email to commissioners.

In a 2011 RTS Vision, Funding, and Governance Study, a survey of "stakeholders" — including representatives of UF, Santa Fe College, the county and the VA — listed the streetcar as a low priority, particularly because of its capital cost.

On the other hand, the long-range transportation plan the city and county commissions adopted in 2010, while meeting as the Metropolitan Transportation Planning Organization, listed a feasibility study of a streetcar system as the third-highest surface transportation program priority.

The Gainesville Area Chamber of Commerce is among the skeptics. Its 2012 transportation task force report recommends a "fix it first" approach for the city that focuses on the repair of roads and improving existing bus service. The chamber advocates that the city remove the streetcar from the long-term transportation plan because it is "cost-prohibitive" and "does not seem like an expense that can be supported."

Mitch Glaeser, the chairman of the chamber, said the business organization's stance was that the city should concentrate on "getting our priorities in order first" and "the resources to implement an extremely costly project could take money away from other priority needs."

Officials at UF, a major source of funding for the city's transit system, are also cautious.

In a March interview, Ed Poppell, president of the University of Florida Development Corporation, which was established for the development of Innovation Square, said the financial sustainability of a streetcar and its impact on current RTS bus service, which students rely on heavily, remain uncertain.

Trimark Properties' John Fleming, the developer of Innovation Square and student housing between downtown and UF, supports the study to see if there is any "unmet potential" a streetcar could tap.

"We need another mode of transportation to get from UF through Innovation Square to downtown," Fleming said.

He said that would allow employees of UF to head downtown and future residents and employees in the Innovation Square area to travel without having to use their cars and fight for a parking space when they return.

Still, Fleming said a "streetcar denotes rail," and the solution might be shorter headways with a traditional bus or a smaller, rubber-tired vehicle.

Across the country, the modern streetcar has seen a resurgence in recent years, bolstered by federal funding support from the Obama administration.

Year-round systems exist in cities such as Little Rock, Memphis, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Portland, Seattle, Tacoma and Tampa. Dozens of other cities across the country are planning systems.

Currently, Washington, D.C., has a system in the works. A political battle is waging over Milwaukee's planned \$65 million system, according to the Chicago Tribune. In Cincinnati, a planned 3.6-mile system has a projected cost of \$133 million, and the lowest bid has come in at least \$17.5 million above the city's projection.

"There's certainly a renewed interest in streetcars, but their success is highly dependent on what you're trying to accomplish," said Steve Polzin, the senior director of Mobility Policy at the University of South Florida Center for Urban Transportation Research. "These are expensive investments, and there tends to be a lot of upkeep with them, so you really need to know what you're getting into. There does tend to be a lot of keeping up with the Joneses with these types of investments, so you have to be careful."

Jeffrey Brown, an associate professor of Urban and Regional Planning at Florida State University, researched the effectiveness of streetcar systems in Little Rock, Memphis, Portland, Seattle, Tacoma, Tampa and New Orleans as a mode of public transportation.

Brown found mixed results.

“If your priority purpose is to carry lots of commuters, they don’t,” Brown said. “Typically, they’re slower than buses.”

Portland’s system, which has had an investment of hundreds of millions of dollars and strong marketing, had the best overall performance and ridership, he said.

On the other hand, Tampa’s system, which caters to tourists in the Ybor City and Channelside areas, has struggled with ridership, both Brown and Polzin said.

Brown said the “fundamental” question a city has to answer is “what do you think this will do that buses can’t do?”

City Commissioner Thomas Hawkins, an advocate for considering a streetcar, said the goal is economic development.

“I think the most promising reason to look at a rail-based system compared to a rubber-tired vehicle system is what it does to the adjacent real estate market,” he said.

Bus routes move, and the location of stops changes, but the “permanence” of rail gives developers of adjacent properties some assurance that mode of transportation will remain there to serve their project, Hawkins said.

Hawkins pointed to a 2008 report the Brookings Institution performed for Washington, D.C., that concluded rail systems boosted the value of adjacent properties.

While proponents attribute economic development to streetcar systems, critics say they receive too much credit.

In a 2012 study, the Cato Institute, a libertarian public policy think tank, said tax incentives through methods such as tax increment financing played a significant role in spurring development in Portland.

Polzin, the USF faculty member, said it is “difficult to parse out cause and effect in economic development” and that a streetcar is usually one piece in a municipal investment that includes incentives.

Because adjacent property owners would benefit from a streetcar, the city potentially could require them to put funding toward it through a special taxing district, Hawkins said.

That is one thing the looming study will look at, he added.

During summer budget meetings, the city likely will discuss a special taxing district to fund parking garages and structures in the Innovation Square area, the costs of which could exceed the early projection for a streetcar system, Hawkins said.

While city officials are in the early stages of planning and consideration, they already are looking at ways to fund the development of a potential system.

The early list of potential projects for a 2014 transportation sales tax referendum includes more than \$75 million for a streetcar system.