



## No streetcar decision, but plenty of opinions

By Don Walker March 6, 2013

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Whether the city of Milwaukee goes ahead with a streetcar system won't be decided anytime soon, but that doesn't mean proponents and opponents don't have something to say.

On Wednesday, Ald. Bob Donovan, the most vocal opponent of the streetcar project, brought in Randal O'Toole, a Cato Institute fellow who has written about the perils of streetcar systems in American cities. O'Toole is scheduled to speak to the Wisconsin Forum tonight on the topic.

Moments after Donovan and O'Toole spoke, Aldermen Bob Bauman and Nik Kovac, as well as Jeff Polenske, the city engineer in charge of managing the project, held a briefing with reporters on why the city needs a streetcar.

We'll summarize their arguments and statements in a moment. But first the basics:

The city has allocated \$64.6 million - funded by \$54.9 million in federal aid and \$9.7 million from a tax incremental financing district - to pay for construction of a modern streetcar line from the lower east side to the downtown Amtrak/Greyhound station. The city is still considering a split in which streetcars would travel south on N. Broadway and north on N. Milwaukee St., between E. Wells St., and E. St. Paul Ave.

At the same time, the Public Service Commission has yet to decide whether the city or utilities must pay for moving private utilities out of the way of the route. That will be a pivotal decision and could very well have a major impact on the project.

Now to the arguments and statements.

Donovan said he believes that, decades from now, Milwaukeeans will look back and call the streetcar "perhaps one of Milwaukee's biggest public works boondoggles in the history of the community."

Donovan said no one is ready to say who will run the streetcar system, who will maintain it and how much it will ultimately cost.

O'Toole has written a paper on the proposed Milwaukee system. O'Toole says he loves trains, but says it's incorrect to say that building a streetcar system will result in enhanced economic development.

O'Toole lives in Portland, a city with a modern streetcar system. But O'Toole argues that new economic development only occurred because of subsidies given to developers.

"They did get development, but (that was) because of subsidies, not because of the streetcar," O'Toole said.

O'Toole said a streetcar system imposes hidden costs on city residents, yet provides few benefits.

O'Toole said the city would be better off by rebuilding its bus system. Buses, he said, cost less, are less costly to operate and are compatible with the automobile.

In response, Bauman and Kovac criticized O'Toole. Bauman called him a "professional rail killer." "He is an acknowledged hater of cities," Bauman said.

Bauman said the streetcar project would create jobs, enhance economic development, improve mobility, and help retain young professionals and the creative class. Just as it has done in other major American cities, he said.

"Everything all of these cities are doing somehow rubs Mr. O'Toole the wrong way," Bauman said.

Kovac said a streetcar by itself "is not going to make a city a smart city." Instead, he said, it's one ingredient to a better city.

Kovac said Milwaukee was the densest city, in terms of urban population, in the country without a modern streetcar or fixed rail system. Stopping the streetcar project, he said, will stop investment and the creation of jobs.

"The streetcar will be the spine of a future public transit system," Kovac said.

PolitiFact Oregon has looked into the streetcar-bus issue.