



Atlanta, other cities seeing renaissance of streetcars

Atlanta is one of many cities in the USA seeing a resurgence of streetcars. Supporters say the vehicles, which once flourished, spur development. Critics say they are a subsidy-driven fad.

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ATLANTA – Once upon a time this city was crisscrossed by electric streetcars. At the peak of streetcar travel in the mid-1920s, some 800 streetcars covering 200 miles of track carried 97 million passenger trips a year. The story was the same around much of the nation: More than 800 other cities also had streetcars.

Then automobile travel exploded. Growth sprawled outward from central cities to suburbs. The Great American Streetcar Scandal that began in 1946 -- in which automaker General Motors and tire and oil companies were accused of buying streetcar systems around the USA and converting them to bus lines – unfolded.

By the end of the 1940s, streetcars were virtually gone from Atlanta and before long, from the American landscape.

Now, streetcars are coming back to Peachtree Street -- and to many other Americans streets for that matter.

The nation is in the middle of a streetcar renaissance, as one city after another includes a slice of the past in its modern transportation mix.

This year alone:

- Tucson's \$196 million Sun Link Streetcar Project, recently named the Public Works Project of the Year by the American Public Works Association, will operate on a 3.9-mile route between downtown and the University of Arizona when it begins service in late July.

- In late summer or early fall, Washington, D.C. will open its \$135 million, 2.4-mile H Street streetcar line. It's expected to provide more than a million rides in the first year and help revitalize a once-thriving retail district in the nation's capital.

- Construction began in April 2012, on Seattle's First Hill Streetcar, a 2.5-mile, \$134 million line expected to begin service in the fall. The streetcar will run between Occidental Avenue in Pioneer Square and Denny Way in Capitol Hill, serving 10 stations along S. Jackson Street, 14th Avenue South, Yesler Way and Broadway.

Streetcar projects are in various stages of design or development in more than a dozen other cities, including Dallas, which plans to open a line from Union Station downtown to Oak Cliff in early 2015; Salt Lake City, where Mayor Ralph Becker's administration is pushing a plan for a streetcar in the central business district downtown, and Kansas City, Mo., which announced last month that it had selected a vendor to operate and maintain its planned two-mile downtown streetcar line.

Later this summer, Atlanta opens a 2.7-mile, electric streetcar line that will ferry commuters and tourists on a 12-stop loop downtown from Centennial Olympic Park to the Martin Luther King Jr. Historic District. The initial route, part of what's envisioned as an eventual 63-mile system, is expected to carry 1,700 passengers a day on four sleek, futuristic cars, planners say.

"It's whisper-silent, all-electric," says Timothy Borchers, executive director of The Atlanta Streetcar and deputy commissioner of public works. "You'll have trouble hearing it coming."

He and other streetcar supporters across the country are quick to tout the benefits: None of the pollutants or emissions that diesel buses spew into the environment, and a burst of economic development surrounding the transportation.

Since the Atlanta streetcar was announced in 2010, it has generated more than \$700 million of new development along the route, Borchers says.

"There isn't just a national renaissance of street cars, there is an international renaissance," says Borchers, who's worked on streetcar projects for 36 years. "This is happening whether you're in Germany, London or Sydney, Australia. This very year, a new 9-mile system, similar to our system, is going up in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. Streetcars are becoming popular again because they work."

Not everyone shares his enthusiasm.

Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the nation's most vocal streetcar critic, says the current boom in streetcars is being fueled by the engineering and construction firms that build the lines and by the Obama administration's policy changes that made it easier for cities to spend federal money on streetcars.

"They (cities) wouldn't care if it was for streetcars, or garbage trucks or digging a hole and filling it up," he says. "They just want the money. And streetcars are just like digging a hole and filling it up. This is a fad that's happening because the federal government is giving out money."

He says streetcars are heavily subsidized by taxpayers, that they are inefficient because they're often underused and they "use the most energy per passenger mile" of any form of ground transportation.

Streetcar plans are stirring local citizen opposition in some cities.

After opponents of a proposed \$64.6 million, 2.1-mile streetcar in Milwaukee argued that the city should have to pay for moving utilities in the path of the line, instead of spreading the cost to utilities and other affected companies, the state Public Service Commission ruled last month that the city does have to pick up the \$20 million tab for relocating the utilities.

In San Antonio, opponents of a \$280 million project showed up in force at a recent meeting of the Bexar County Commission. Anti-streetcar groups are pushing for an amendment to the city charter that would prohibit using the city's right-of-way for a streetcar.

In Arlington, Va., where estimates for the cost of a proposed streetcar line have risen as high as \$350 million, an anti-streetcar group called Arlingtonians for Sensible Transit is fighting the project.

"The biggest concern is that the project in Columbia Pike would not have a dedicated lane for the streetcar," says Peter Rousselot, a leader of the group. "The proposal is to add 10 streetcars daily to a street that already has 34 buses. And it doesn't go to some major employment centers nearby, particularly the Pentagon."

Meanwhile, here in Atlanta, what's old is about to be very new again.

As far back as the 1870s, the writer Joel Chandler Harris, author of the Uncle Remus tales, would hop a streetcar from his home in the West End to downtown.

Later this summer, people will once again be able to hop a streetcar.

It'll be free for the first month. Then the fare is \$1 each for the first three trips of the day and free afterward.