



## Oklahoma City Streetcar: Prepare for a Battle

By: Steve Lackmeyer- June 23, 2013

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I'm intrigued by all the maneuverings underway as the time nears for the city to actually prepare to pull the trigger on funding and building a city streetcar system as part of MAPS 3.

First, watch the above video created by the public information office at City Hall, which features hired consultant Mike McAnelly providing a very pro-streetcar message that not only attempts to educate how a streetcar system might work, but also includes some subtle arguments for why a streetcar system is a good investment for the city. Note also that photos used in the presentation, used for a MAPS 3 project update, appear linked to Jeff Bezdek (he appears in one image on the video), who led the MAPS 3 campaign push for including the streetcar on the 2009 ballot and has repeatedly communicated independently of City Hall with not just consultants but also potential vendors who could be in the running to work on the streetcar system as it is built.

The video is an interesting move by the city's public information office, considering some city council members are voicing increased concern and even opposition to moving forward with the project. One gets the impression that Ward 2 Councilman Ed Shadid is eager to scrap the project all together.

But is Shadid prepared to break faith with voters who were promised by the city council, via a resolution, that the streetcar system would be built if they approved the MAPS 3 tax? As I mentioned on this blog back in 2009, that resolution could be scrapped with just five votes.

Consider that of those who voted for that resolution, only Pete White, Meg Salyer, Larry McAtee, Pat Ryan and Mayor Mick Cornett remain in office. Of those, White has already indicated his uneasiness with the streetcar and regret over supporting its placement among the MAPS 3 projects. Also consider that assurances made during the MAPS 3 campaign that Oklahoma City stood a good chance to get matching federal funding for the system. But the city has now been repeatedly rejected in such efforts.

Finally, also consider that when McAnelly speaks about development along the Portland streetcar system (the city is considered the ideal in urban development along rail) but he doesn't mention the economic incentives that were provided to make development a reality along that city's streetcar routes.

Now let's consider what's going on with the anti-streetcar folks.

Former Congressman Ernest Istook is seen as the Darth Vader to the local rail community. I witnessed how he killed an effort to build a 2.9 mile downtown (edited to show it wasn't a "light" style rail) rail system as part of the original MAPS 20 years ago. In that ballot, voters approved \$3 million for the project with the condition that 50 percent federal funding be obtained. Our state's senators supported the effort, and our congressional delegation prior to the MAPS vote supported it as well. But then Mickey Edwards, long time 5th District representative for the OKC metro, lost to Istook. Then Mayor Ron Norick blasted Istook and held him responsible for killing the project.

In the above paragraph, I've provided links to news stories at the time of this debate should Istook or anyone else dispute what happened. You can also read how Istook opposed efforts in 2003 – early planning for MAPS 3 – to revive a rail transit system. And make no mistake, Istook opposes rail transit. I've yet to learn whether he had an early childhood trauma involving trains, but he definitely doesn't like them.

Istook left Congress in 2007. Did he choose to return to Oklahoma City to live and work? Nope. He stayed in Alexandria, Va., where he now works with the Heritage Foundation. His town, Alexandria, is served by hundreds of miles of rail connections provided by commuter rail, express rail and Amtrak. It's a town that is looking to expand its rail system.

Yes, Istook has chosen to live and work in a community that greatly benefits from rail-based public transit. He chose to live in Alexandria instead of Oklahoma City.

This, however, doesn't stop Istook from accepting guest hosting gigs on the drive-home shift on KTOK, as he did last week.

His guest on Thursday was the Cato Institute's Randal O'Toole, who has gone out of his way to tell Oklahoma City, Milwaukee and other cities embarking on streetcar projects how they are bad investments. His guest column appeared in *The Oklahoman*, and his analysis, with footnote sometimes referring to his own work, can be read here. If McAnelly's presentation for the city was unabashedly pro-streetcar, then O'Toole's analysis, "The Streetcar Scam," is equally slated to portray streetcars as a worst case alternative for public transit. There is no middle ground with these various sides – they're fighting to win.

One curious tidbit in O'Toole's report is how public advocates of streetcars have ended up getting lucrative jobs with vendors that benefit from such public investments. Question: has that occurred in Oklahoma City?

O'Toole, speaking last week to a conservative audience at KTOK with Istook as his show host, served red meat to the anti rail folks. He spoke about how rail transit disappeared in the mid-20th century, claiming it was due to the market preferring automobile transit. No mention was made, of course, about how rail transit, including in Oklahoma, was killed by a concerted effort by General Motors to buy up rail systems and tear them out to force a switch to road-based transportation. This isn't conspiracy talk. It really happened, including in Tulsa. A different set of actions were taken in Oklahoma City, but it too involved some sneaky behind the scenes manipulations (which I explain in my book *OKC Second Time Around*). You can read and view an excellent CBS News report on this controversy here.

Indeed, Oklahoma City once had a thriving Interurban and Oklahoma City Railway system. You can see videos of the operation thanks to Retro Metro OKC:

The historical record shows that efforts have been underway at City Hall to restore rail passenger service since the late 1980s. So this isn't Oklahoma City rushing to latch hold to the latest fad.

That is history, however., and this is now. But let's not misrepresent history either, OK?

The other statement O'Toole made was that streetcars are far more expensive than automobile transportation. He didn't give any sourcing for this conclusion. I'd be curious how this factors in highway construction projects like the \$650 million I-40 Crosstown Expressway. He also doesn't acknowledge cities where rail-based transit have spurred development and jump-started public transportation. For O'Toole and those who heavily advocate streetcars, it's either Heaven or Hell.

From personal experience, I know that asking unpopular questions with either side will provoke their wrath. But this summer, I'm dedicated to doing just that, and going beyond the talking points and rhetoric.