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How the two sides on the streetcar debate differ



Rendering of Milwaukee streetcar along Wells Street. Streetcar supporters from across the nation have worked together on development concerns, but opposition has remained largely a local affair.



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The groups opposing streetcars in various U.S. cities don't seem to be sharing notes, but the engineers planning the systems are.

The Milwaukee downtown streetcar is among a handful coming together across the U.S., including projects in Kansas City, Cincinnati and San Antonio. Each of those has faced opposition by local groups and elected officials, most focusing on the cost of building and operating the systems.

Some of those groups, including the McIver Institute in Wisconsin, have turned to Randal O'Toole, senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. O'Toole has done numerous studies challenging the assertion that streetcars spur development. Having worked nationwide, O'Toole said he hasn't seen unity among the scattered local groups, each opposing a streetcar in their own community.

“I wish there was a broader national movement, but really it’s all local groups,” he said. “As far as a national movement on streetcars, you are talking to it.”

The opposite is true among those supporting streetcars. Many, including Cincinnati, have sent delegations to other cities such as Portland to see other systems in action.

While the city of Milwaukee works on engineering for the streetcar, officials are talking with planners in other communities that have built them, said Milwaukee city engineer Jeff Polenske. The Federal Transit Administration, which is financing many of the local projects, encourages the correspondence to work through technical challenges, he said.

“We try to share our challenges and learn from each other,” Polenske said. “We’ve worked together and FTA has done a good job of providing information as far as who’s working on which projects. They have an interest in this as well.”

Catch my update in the Jan. 10 issue of The Business Journal on the planning for the \$64.6 million Milwaukee streetcar.