



Streetcars a poor investment

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Streetcars, once commonplace in major American cities, gradually fell out of favor many decades ago, losing out to more flexible and arguably useful modes of transportation like buses and cars.

Now, across the country, streetcars are making a comeback of sorts. Riverside city officials, spearheaded by Mayor Rusty Bailey, have pushed consideration of bringing them back to the city. It's "Riverside Reconnects," the name for the potentially 12-mile-long line spanning from UC Riverside to downtown, then southwest to La Sierra.

An initial study commissioned by the city last year is due to be released and publicly discussed in late September or October.

On the general concept of bringing streetcars back and the Riverside project specifically, here are several reasons for taxpayers to be skeptical.

"Streetcars are the latest urban planning fad stimulated partly by the Obama administration's preference for funding transportation projects that promote 'livability' (meaning living without automobiles) rather than mobility or cost-effective transportation," argued Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, in a 2012 policy analysis.

Primarily promoted on the grounds that they will spur economic development, streetcar projects depend on significant investments by taxpayers, through direct and indirect costs. The Riverside project is anticipated to cost over \$600 million to build and \$9 million annually to maintain. Given the nature of government, cost-overruns are to be expected.

It is hoped most of the construction costs will be covered by federal and state grants and programs, which is to say, taxpayer money siphoned off by the federal and state governments.

The Press-Enterprise reported that one estimate suggested by 2035 streetcar ridership could account for 2.3 percent of all trips along its route, if bus services currently serving that corridor were "retooled to reduce overlap." Cars still would constitute the vast majority of commutes.

In other words, the project won't serve very many people. But that's almost a given in discussions of such projects, as the possibility of economic development is the main rationale, not mobility. The extent to which development might come to fruition will need to be further fleshed out in studies of the Riverside proposal. Questions remain on whether it makes sense as a taxpayer investment.

If it is economic development that's the issue, a better idea is to make it easier to do business throughout the state, county and city by cutting taxes and regulations.