

## Tucson, Tempe get behind trolley idea

by [Sean Holstege](#) - May. 11, 2010 12:00 AM  
 The Arizona Republic

When the Valley's light-rail line was taking shape, some critics labeled it a trolley, suggesting it was a failed century-old technology.

But modern, electrified streetcars are making a comeback around the country, including in Arizona.

In February, the U.S. Department of Transportation awarded Tucson a \$63 million grant to help build a 4-mile streetcar line linking the University of Arizona and downtown. Arizona's second-largest city beat out hundreds of competitors for the money.

In Tempe, momentum is building behind a proposed 2 ½-mile streetcar line along Mill Avenue that would connect with the Valley's starter light-rail line. Planners found that the streetcar is cheaper in an era of tight budgets and quicker to build than an originally conceived light-rail spur on Rural Road.

The proliferation of streetcar projects is being driven not only by those factors, but by changing urban landscapes and a major shift in federal transportation policy.

Unlike light rail, streetcars often run on short lines and stop frequently, helping connect neighborhoods and promote development and street life. The newer systems are sleeker, more extensive and more efficient than one-car, refurbished vintage trolleys that were re-introduced in the 1980s into some downtowns, including

Tucson's.

About 15 U.S. cities have vintage or modern systems, according to Jim Graebner, who chairs a streetcar committee for the American Public Transportation Association. About 60 cities have plans to add streetcar lines, he said. A third of those are in advanced stages, the Federal Transit Administration reports.

"Streetcars are making a comeback because they help unify communities and boost their economic vitality. People want the choice of moving between work, home, school, church and shopping without having to get into their car," FTA Administrator Peter Rogoff said.

Transportation officials and planners widely cite Portland's and [San Diego's](#) trolley systems as successful models because they are credited with bringing vitality to those cities' downtowns. The FTA called Portland's project a great success story because it carries 12,000 daily riders and spurred investments in the region.

## Arizona plans

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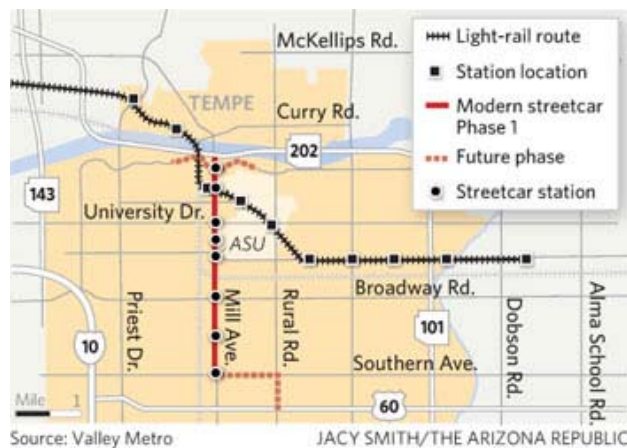
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Tucson is moving forward to open its 4-mile, 18-stop trolley line in two years.

Gary Hayes, executive director of the Pima Association of Governments, said the project was in a holding pattern until the federal money was pledged.

"When they made the announcement, I was dumbfounded - a., because they got it; and b., because of the amount they got," Hayes said. As a result, developers along the line were suddenly "champing at the bit," he said.



Marc Soronson, a consultant on the Tucson and Tempe projects, said that until Tucson got the award, private developers couldn't get financial backing to revitalize the area. Since the award, they've been able to line up \$1 billion in investments, he said.

Tempe's plans are not as far along. In June, the public will get its most complete look yet at plans for a line that would run from the Mill Avenue light-rail station to Southern Avenue and would feature nine stops. The Tempe City Council is expected to vote on the idea in the fall.

The Mill Avenue streetcar proposal, expected to cost \$162 million to build, is the outcome of studies for Tempe's light-rail

extension called for in the region's Proposition 400 plan.

Prop. 400 called for two major transit expansions in Tempe. One was a 2-mile light-rail spur running south, most likely along Rural Road. The second was a rapid bus line to carry riders farther.

But planners' studies found the light-rail line on Rural would be too expensive for the number of riders it would carry. They identified trolleys on Mill as a better choice.

As for the rapid bus line down Rural, the Maricopa Association of Governments opted to defer it until after the Prop. 400 sales tax expires, meaning that the line can't be built without a new source of money.

That leaves the streetcar as Tempe's only remaining transit expansion with funding.

Tempe is seeking federal money for engineering. If the project is approved and funded, streetcars could run along Mill Avenue in 2017, says the city's project manager, Dawn Coomer.

She says streetcars fit the character of the

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area better than other systems.

She and Wulf Grote, Metro's planning director, say Tempe may recommend studying two future streetcar extensions, though they are unfunded.

Graebner and others say the streetcar resurgence is more than a fad because, starting with Portland in 2001, cities have found that streetcars catalyze development like light rail, at a [lower cost](#).

Critics, such as author Randall O'Toole, argue that developments like those in Portland couldn't have occurred without subsidized fares, federal grants and taxes from development improvement districts.

O'Toole, a researcher for the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, wrote recently in his blog that Portland based its claim that streetcars generated \$2.3 billion in redevelopment by "adding up all the development that had taken place within three blocks of the streetcar . . . and attributed it to the streetcar. ... Most of this stuff would have happened without the streetcar."

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