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D.C. Streetcar: Follow Arlington's Lead

By Emily Goff
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The Arlington County Board just gave taxpayers another reason to give thanks on Thursday: It canceled a planned streetcar program. The Board's 4–1 decision reflected concerns over the project's cost, effectiveness, and ability to spur development in blighted neighborhoods. Officials overseeing Washington, D.C.'s streetcar project should follow Arlington's lead and wind down its streetcar program now.

Arlington's proposed streetcar system, planned in conjunction with Fairfax County, was billed as a modern marvel. The 7.4-mile system would extend from the Skyline area of Fairfax County, along Columbia Pike, through Crystal City to Potomac Yard. But as is the case with most transit projects, the glittering promises soon gave way to extravagant cost escalations: The latest price tag topped out at $550 million—nearly $75 million per mile.

Supporters insisted that the project would encourage economic development. But would it? Cato Institute's Randal O'Toole dispels that myth, citing Portland's streetcar as an example:

What streetcar advocates rarely if ever mention is that the city [Portland] also gave developers hundreds of millions of dollars of infrastructure subsidies, tax breaks, and other incentives to build in the streetcar corridor. Almost no new development took place on portions of the streetcar route where developers received no additional subsidies.

As one observer noted, Arlington residents became skeptical that the project could produce economic benefits—development, increased property values—that would exceed the project's cost. The math became increasingly difficult as the costs mounted.

Economic development was also a major rationale fueling the proposal to build D.C.'s 2.4-mile streetcar line along H Street and Benning Road in Northeast, but that area was enjoying rapid development and gentrification long before any tracks were laid and streetcar testing began. New restaurants, bars, stores, and apartments have sprung up along H Street with dizzying speed. And the plan to open a Whole Foods continues apace—none of it thanks to the streetcar.

Those flocking to H Street get there by a combination of walking from nearby neighborhoods, using ride-sharing services, driving, using Metrorail, or hopping on one of the (faster) bus lines that already serves the corridor. The streetcar stops well short of Union Station, home to the closest Metrorail stop and taxi stand; it's hard to imagine people getting out of a cab, car, or bus to wait for and then ride the streetcar for a few blocks.

The Washington Post calls the D.C. Streetcar a "troubled project." In a recent article entitled "Rolling Blunder," *The Economist* questions the claims concerning cost-competitiveness and economic development typically made by lobbyists for small-bore streetcar projects like D.C.'s. The article blames federal subsidies for encouraging local officials to pursue such "silly" projects.

The D.C. streetcar project is an example of President Obama's Department of Transportation (DOT) pursuing its utopian goal of livability—a world in which no one has to use a car. The DOT has no qualms about throwing money at ineffective, costly streetcars as a means of chasing that dream. But some cities are wising up. Arlington is the latest, but maybe not the last, to choose rationality over nostalgia. The District can and should follow its courageous lead.