

Why I Support the Streetcar

Not moving forward will send a wrong message to all those looking to invest in Milwaukee, a city businessman argues.

By Russell Rossetto - Jan 26th, 2015 09:58 am

The streetcar near the Milwaukee Intermodal Station.

Milwaukee has a first-class public works department, is well known for top notch city planning and has a rich and diversified history of urban transit. We're at the end of a long road for those of us who have been active observers, and even participants, in the long planning process for the Milwaukee streetcar project. I personally have taken an interest in the streetcar plan because I believe that a robust and layered public transportation system is absolutely necessary for a city: at the very least, to properly function, but at best, to flourish.

At the many public meetings that were held over the last five years, informational presentations, Common Council and committee meetings, Federal Transportation Administration hearings, there has been ample opportunity for public commentary and criticism.

I have taken advantage of some of these opportunities, as an engaged citizen and a local business owner, to exercise my right to express opinions and views at these meetings. It comes as a surprise to me, now, that a small group of people who have not been active in the planning process are trying to derail years of careful and holistic planning. A standard aspect of legwork for public works projects is soliciting community input, fleshing out problems, rigorous evaluation of challenges and long term impacts, not least of these impacts being budgetary sustainability and ensuring sound funding mechanisms. Regarding these matters, the city's [Department of Public Works](#) and [Department of City Development](#) have both done their homework.

Throughout this entire process, I have gained a more intimate knowledge of the DPW and DCD. These organizations are responsible for maintaining the city's infrastructure and keeping it on pace with changing needs, with an eye on the competitiveness of Milwaukee in the global marketplace of cities. Kudos to the hard work and comprehensive results from the men and women of the DPW and the DCD: you are world class, and you have done us proud!

The fact of the matter is that constraints play a huge roll in defining any project, the most obvious being budgetary. Regarding the streetcar system, what has been settled upon is the best that can be accomplished by Phase 1 of the streetcar. Expansions into [Bronzeville](#), the South Side (where my business is located), and other areas are crucial for a functional system, but they will never happen if Phase 1 doesn't happen.

In light of a long trend of decreasing funding for the county-operated bus system, the introduction of another mode of public transit that compliments and even replaces some of the bus lines is a welcome development. Not moving forward on this project puts future federal funding for

transportation in Milwaukee at stake, as well as sending the wrong message to all of the bold architects of change and innovation and development in this city, in both the private and the public sectors.

We must be a city that embraces the positive influence of creative, forward-thinking energy, because we have a host of other problems that need our urgent attention — the most important being the state of race relations and the generation-long decline in the health of some of our inner city communities. The Milwaukee streetcar project does not solve these issues directly, but through construction employment, future system operations and maintenance employment and increased urban mobility for all local workers, it does help. Let's take care of business, get Phase 1 of the Milwaukee streetcar in the ground, and move forward to become a more transit-diverse, vibrant and forward-thinking city.

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