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Streetcar gains final Common Council approval; referendum effort ongoing

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The Milwaukee streetcar gained its third and final majority vote from the Common Council on Tuesday, but a petition to force a referendum on the project's construction still is in the works.

The Common Council voted 9-6 to not reconsider the vote, which lets the previous vote approving the streetcar stand. Tuesday's approval marks a step forward for the much-debated project that business leaders have said will attract more young workers and new businesses to the city. Opponents argue the city should not spend money on the streetcar, and that instead of building a rail system, buses would be cheaper and just as effective.

Tuesday marked the third meeting in as many months where the Common Council considered the \$123.9 million downtown streetcar and local city funding for it. In each of the previous two cases, the streetcar had the support of a majority of aldermen, but a final decision was delayed through parliamentary procedures.

Tuesday's vote gives the city clearance to continue planning and engineering the system, but the streetcar still may require approval via a voter referendum before construction begins. Citizens for Responsible Government is trying to collect at least 31,000 signatures to force a referendum to pass a law that requires voter referendum approval for fixed rail transit projects worth at least \$20 million.

[Chris Kliesmet](#), spokesman for CRG, said Tuesday morning that he had collected 16,273 signatures thus far, and is trying to hit a goal of about 35,000 signatures by March 3.

"They can pretty much do whatever they want," he said of city engineering for the streetcar. "Before they stick a shovel in the ground, we are demanding a vote."

The Milwaukee city attorney's office has questioned whether that referendum effort could affect the streetcar. That issue could end up in court.

The streetcar would run from the Milwaukee Intermodal Station, past the 3rd Ward, through the central business district and north into the city's densely populated lower east side. In late 2014, plans were expanded to include a new spur to the downtown lakefront, with a stop in the base of the proposed Couture apartment high-rise.

The streetcar's construction would be financed through \$64.9 million in federal grants and \$59 million in city money through tax incremental financing districts. Those districts would pay for the project with increased taxes generated by rising property values in three areas, including the downtown lakefront and part of the 3rd Ward. The Common Council voted Tuesday, on the same 9-6 counts, not to reconsider previous votes that approved those TIF districts.

Those TIF districts require a final approval on Thursday from a Joint Review Board that has representatives from Milwaukee County, Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Area Technical College.

Reporter Sean Ryan covers commercial and residential real estate for the Milwaukee Business Journal and through the [Real Estate Roundup blog](#) on the website. He also covers construction, highways and public transit.