

EDITORIAL

A streetcar named desired



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Urban areas today are once again thriving engines of economic activity where Americans want to live, work and play. Large numbers of people, especially young people, don't want to waste time and money on automobile commutes in exchange for a few more square feet of living space in isolated suburbs with strip malls and big-box stores. They prefer to live near where they work and enjoy the amenities that cities offer, including live entertainment, unique restaurants and shops, and a vibrant atmosphere.

That's certainly the case with Milwaukee, but a key ingredient in the success of other cities is missing: Milwaukee is the most densely populated city in the country without a rail component in its transportation system.

Integrated, multi-modal transportation systems are major contributors to the phenomenal resurgence of urban centers throughout the nation — and the world. These systems utilize and connect with other modes of mass transit — trains, busses and streetcars — that are suitable for different lengths of travel and different areas of population density. For moving people around the most heavily populated areas, nothing beats streetcars.

Streetcars are coordinated to have stops along bus routes, encouraging more use of public transportation and thus less traffic congestion and pollution. Pedestrians, bus riders, train travelers, automobile drivers and bicyclists use the streetcars as a link to their final destinations. Streetcars are also useful to people who only want to park once and then go several places without having to move their cars.



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Milwaukee's proposed streetcar system eventually would cover an extensive area, but it would begin with a \$124-million loop route connecting the densest residential neighborhood in the state of Wisconsin (north downtown) with the densest collection of jobs in the state of Wisconsin (east downtown); the loop would also encompass the Third Ward, the Lakefront and the Milwaukee Intermodal Station (Amtrak station).

According to Rocky Marcoux, commissioner of the department of city development, this starter route reaches 90 percent of major downtown employers and 80 percent of hotel rooms.

Research shows that streetcars are especially desirable to the kind of talented young people who are leaving Wisconsin in droves because of its shrinking educational and employment opportunities. This is one of the grayest states in the country, and it's growing grayer all the time.

Streetcars have proven to be outstanding economic generators in other cities. They leverage an astounding amount of private sector development activity, which is why the business community supports them so strongly. A major bank or other corporate entity is more likely to develop a downtown building if there's an easy, convenient way to get people to work without having to build massive parking structures. New shops and restaurants will develop along the streetcar stops, expanding the city's tax base as well as its amenities.

Milwaukee has been sitting for decades on a \$54-million federal grant that can only be used for rail. Mayor Tom Barrett plans to use those funds for the streetcar system and raise additional money through tax incremental districts, so businesses that stand to benefit from the project will pay most of the rest. Money raised in this way helped construct Manpower International headquarters, the Harley-Davidson Museum, the Riverwalk and other projects that have proven vital to the city.

Conservative Ald. Bob Donovan, who clearly fails to grasp this key trend in urban development, is leading the charge against securing the final sources of funding. Contact your city representatives and other elected officials and urge them to quickly build and expand the proposed streetcar system.

Milwaukee will ride it into the future.



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Michael DeWan D.D.S., S.C.
2445 N. Farwell Ave.

414.962.5915
www.dewandental.com

