

August 14, 2008

Downtowns Across the U.S. See Streetcars in Their Future

By BOB DRIEHAUS

CINCINNATI — From his months-old French bistro, Jean-Robert de Cavel sees restored Italianate row houses against a backdrop of rundown tenements in this city's long-struggling Over-the-Rhine neighborhood.

He also sees a turnaround for the district, thanks to plans to revive a transit system that was dismantled in the 1950s: the humble streetcar line.

"Human beings can be silly because we move away from things too quickly in this country," Mr. de Cavel said. "Streetcar is definitely going to create a reason for young people to come downtown."

Cincinnati officials are assembling financing for a \$132 million system that would connect the city's riverfront stadiums, downtown business district and Uptown neighborhoods, which include six hospitals and the [University of Cincinnati](#), in a six- to eight-mile loop. Depending on the final financing package, fares may be free, 50 cents or \$1.

The city plans to pay for the system with existing tax revenue and \$30 million in private investment. The plan requires the approval of Mayor Mark Mallory, a proponent, and the City Council.

At least 40 other cities are exploring streetcar plans to spur economic development, ease traffic congestion and draw young professionals and empty-nest baby boomers back from the suburbs, according to the Community Streetcar Coalition, which includes city officials, transit authorities and engineers who advocate streetcar construction.

More than a dozen have existing lines, including New Orleans, which is restoring a system devastated by [Hurricane Katrina](#). And Denver, Houston, Salt Lake City and Charlotte, N.C., have introduced or are planning to introduce streetcars.

"They serve to coalesce a neighborhood," said Jim Graebner, chairman of the American Public Transportation Association's streetcar and vintage trolley committee. "That's very evident in places like San Francisco, which never got rid of its streetcar system."

Modern streetcars, like those Cincinnati plans to use, cost about \$3 million each, run on an overhead electrical wire and carry up to 130 passengers per car on rails that are flush with the pavement. And since streetcars can pick up passengers on either side, they can make shorter stops than buses.

Streetcar advocates point to Portland, Ore., which built the first major modern streetcar system in the United States, in 2001, and has since added new lines

interlaced with a growing light rail system. Since Portland announced plans for the system, more than 10,000 residential units have been built and \$3.5 billion has been invested in property within two blocks of the line, according to Portland Streetcar Inc., which operates the system.

Critics, including Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the [Cato Institute](#), a libertarian research organization in Washington, and an expert on urban growth and transportation issues, counter that growth along streetcar lines is dependent on public subsidy and of little use.

"It looks like it's going to take you somewhere, but it's only designed to support downtown residents," he said. "If officials fall for the hype and don't ask the hard questions, voters should vote them out."

Cincinnati's streetcar enthusiasts counter that they serve to shrink residents' everyday world of work, shopping and entertainment by bringing services and businesses to one area.

"One happy consequence will be that streetcar customers who live in the area will be less mobile by choice," said John Schneider, a Cincinnati real estate developer and downtown resident who championed an unsuccessful 2002 county sales tax proposal that would have financed a regional light rail system.

Since then, gas prices have risen sharply and advocates have started emphasizing streetcars' ability to revitalize urban neighborhoods.

"In years gone by, people would move to cities to get a job," Cincinnati's city manager, Milton Dohoney, said. "Today, young, educated workers move to cities with a sense of place. And if businesses see us laying rail down on a street, they'll know that's a permanent route that will have people passing by seven days a week." After looking into streetcar systems in Seattle, Tacoma, Wash., and Charlotte, Mr. Dohoney became convinced that they spur growth. "Cincinnati has to compete with other cities for investment," he said. "We have to compete for talent and for place of national prominence."

A hundred miles north, Mayor Michael Coleman of Columbus, Ohio, has come to the same conclusion and is pushing to build a \$103 million streetcar network along the city's High Street connecting [Ohio State University](#) with the downtown business district. The loop would be paid for through a 4 percent surcharge on concert tickets, sporting events and downtown parking and a \$12.5 million contribution from Ohio State.

"It is directly tied to economic development, and when times are tough in Ohio, we need an additional tool to create jobs," Mr. Coleman said.

While critics question whether scarce city money would be better spent elsewhere, Mr. Coleman argues that streetcars are important to the city's growth.

"We have to plan for the future," he said. "I believe in 10 years, we would ask, 'Why didn't we do this?' It will be 10 times more expensive, and the cost of gas will be unaffordable."