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Downtown Should Bring Back the Streetcar

Portland Success Shows That System Could Spur Development And Reduce Traffic

by Homer Williams and Dike Dame

As the financial and cultural anchor of the West Coast, Los Angeles typically exports creative ideas to communities around the country. Thus, it may seem odd to suggest that America's second-largest city should actually import a transportation concept from Portland, Ore.: a downtown streetcar system.

There are numerous reasons to do so: Having a streetcar could stimulate new development, reduce traffic, and bring the neighborhoods of Downtown closer together.

The idea of a streetcar connecting Los Angeles neighborhoods is neither new nor radical. During a 90-year period, Los Angeles developed one of the largest streetcar networks ever constructed. By the 1930s, the system had nearly 600 miles of track, used more than 1,200 cars and was a major factor in shaping the city's development pattern. Yet after World War II, the automobile enabled rapid development of suburban housing and significantly changed the urban landscape. The Los Angeles streetcar system began to decline as public resources were instead invested in highways. By 1963, the streetcar system had been abandoned.



In Portland, more than \$2.5 billion in new, diverse development has opened along a seven-mile streetcar line since its 2001 debut. Photo courtesy South Group.

Many cities that abandoned their systems are taking a fresh look at the streetcar's potential to revitalize and energize the urban core. In the late 1990s, we saw the potential for a streetcar revival to connect and energize downtown Portland neighborhoods. A group of business leaders, with encouragement from the city, formed a private non-profit to design and construct a new streetcar line connecting an abandoned rail yard with the core of the city. The proposal from Portland Streetcar Inc. reflected the development plans of each institution and neighborhood that would be affected, thus gaining immediate acceptance. In turn, businesses agreed to support a rate increase at public parking garages in the central business district. The new revenue was then bonded by the city for construction.

Since opening in September 2001, the Portland Streetcar has become an integral part of the central city, providing visitors and residents alike with a convenient option for moving through downtown and accessing the regional light rail system. The streetcar also links the city with its transportation history, which included a wide network of trolleys and streetcars going back more than 100 years. The project is one of the best examples in the Northwest of public and private commitments generating a unique transit and development solution. It has led to new and dense urban neighborhoods within the city core.

Los Angeles has been considering resurrecting its own streetcar system for nearly a decade. If our experience in Portland is any guide, this vision can be realized, but only if city leaders and private developers embrace a common objective, forge a workable partnership and commit to making a joint investment.

The benefits of a local circulator in Downtown Los Angeles are clear. A modern streetcar can be useful, attractive and cost-efficient, especially compared to light rail (the cost in Portland was less than one-fifth the capital cost of a comparable light rail system per track mile). In addition, a modern L.A. streetcar can be designed to fit the flavor of the neighborhoods and provide easy pedestrian access. But perhaps most important, a Los Angeles streetcar system could be an economic engine and a community builder.

Our experience shows that the streetcar can accelerate the pace of private development by 200% to 300%, yielding a high return on public investment. From an initial investment of \$57 million, Portland has already seen more than \$2.5 billion in new, diverse development spring up along the seven-mile Portland Streetcar line, with enormous potential ahead as the line is extended to the South Waterfront, the largest redevelopment project in Portland history. Keep in mind, this took place in a city that has fewer than 800,000 people within its bounds. Imagine the potential financial and community benefits in a city the size of Los Angeles.

In addition to accelerating new development, a Los Angeles streetcar line could organize and connect those investments and help create a stronger sense of community Downtown. New amenities and services become available. Density increases, commutes decrease. Building becomes more creative and integrated. And by mitigating the need to drive and park, a streetcar reduces traffic and the carbon emissions that come with it. It would stimulate pedestrian activity and help humanize the streets of Los Angeles. The result would be a healthier, sustainable urban environment, more attractive for residents, workers, visitors and small businesses alike.

In Portland, we underestimated these positive community impacts. With the streetcar now in place, there are no longer islands of development in Portland's urban center. Instead, the streetcar acts as a "spine" that connects and energizes urban neighborhoods. Residents, students and tourists use it. Businesses also gravitate toward it, understanding that the streetcar provides both visibility and foot traffic. This unifying effect could be especially meaningful in Los Angeles, where the future vitality of Downtown will depend on connecting its business, cultural, entertainment and residential communities. Bunker Hill, the Fashion District, the Music Center, the Historic Core, South Park - all these areas are thriving, but they cannot reach their full potential in isolation.

In the coming years, Portland's streetcar will continue to shape the urban fabric and spark new neighborhood development. It is a continuing example of development shaping transit and transit shaping development to create a better urban life for the community.

There is no reason Los Angeles can't duplicate - and even far exceed - this success in the renaissance of its downtown. All that's needed is vision, willpower and a shared commitment from city and private leaders.

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underway including Downtown's first new residential buildings in more than 20 years: Elleven, Luma and Evo.

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