

## ***City could have streetcar between downtown, KWC***

**By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer**

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An electric powered streetcar like those operating in downtown Portland, Ore., glides down Frederica Street in this photo illustration. Longer term downtown development plans include some form of a light rail electric or alternative fuel powered streetcar that would run the 2.2 miles along Frederica Street linking downtown to Kentucky Wesleyan College. Officials are hoping to get federal funding help with the project estimated to cost \$30 million to \$40 million. Photo illustration by Gary Emord-Netzley, M-I.

Seventy-five years after the last streetcar on the Owensboro City Railroad line changed its way into history, the city is considering a \$30 million to \$40 million 21st-century version -- running from the riverfront to Kentucky Wesleyan College 2.2 miles to the south.

"It's a long-term plan," Nick Brake, president of the Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corp., said recently. "We're primarily looking for federal money. There's a very, very small chance that we could do this without federal funds."

But with all the stimulus money coming out of Washington these days, it's a good time to be seeking federal funds, says Scott Polikov, president of the Gateway Planning Group of Fort Worth, Texas.

Gateway developed the \$80 million downtown master plan for the city. The proposed streetcar line is in the second phase of the plan -- and the cost is not part of the \$80 million.

"We need federal support to make it happen," Polikov said earlier this month. "But the new transportation bill is being put together now for the next six to seven years. If we miss this opportunity, we'll have to wait six or seven years for the next bill. So, the timing is real good."

But even with funding, he said, it would take several years to get a streetcar line operating on Frederica Street.

"The federal environmental study and the design process will take time," Polikov said. "It's a longer-term project."

"There are a couple of different opportunities," Brake said. "We need to increase our walkability factor in the community. One prerequisite is increased population downtown."

"Light rail," he said, "is the best term for what we're talking about."

"It wouldn't be a trolley," Polikov said. "It would be sleeker, more of a modern streetcar running on electricity or alternative fuels."

The vehicles, which run on tracks, are brightly colored with lots of glass, without the boxy look of trolleys.

"There's a sense of permanence with rail," Brake said. "It makes the most sense to put it in the right lane of traffic. Rails would be below the surface of the street so traffic could use that lane as well."

Polikov said the cars would run at street level "so people could get on and off easily. There would probably be stations at both ends of the line and in the middle."

Brake foresees two cars -- one running each way between KWC and downtown.

"College students could live downtown or they could work downtown or go downtown for the nightlife -- all by using a streetcar," he said.

"Our downtown will never be able to support a supermarket," Brake said. "So people who live downtown could use the train to shop for groceries."

In other cities, he said, "Where rail has been put in, the private investments along the line have been more than the cost of the rail. The economic benefits are great."

Gateway's master plan says that Little Rock, Ark., opened its 2.5-mile River Rail streetcar in 2004, connecting that city's arena, convention center and River Market District as well as lofts, hotels, government buildings and museums.

"It has been so successful that work has begun on a mile-long extension to the William J. Clinton Presidential Library," the master plan says. "About \$200 million in development has either been planned or built along the \$19.6-million line, Street Smart estimates."

In 2007, USA Today reported that Tampa, Fla., had spent \$55 million on a 2.5-mile modern streetcar line in its fashionable loft and entertainment district -- and attracted more than \$1 billion in private investment along the line.

The article quoted Shelley Poticha, president and CEO of Reconnecting America, a national nonprofit group that works to spur development around transit stops, saying that streetcar lines are so popular that developers in some cities are helping pay for them.

In 2006, Reconnecting America said that nearly 70 cities were either building, planning or actively investigating streetcar systems.

"Streetcars are uniquely suited right now to promote the walkable, sustainable, high-intensity development that is proving so popular with young people and empty-nesters," Poticha said at the time. "Streetcars are really all about the pedestrian, and are often called 'pedestrian accelerators' and even 'pedestrian slingshots.' "

Owensboro's master plan says: "Vehicles typically consist of a single car, ranging from restored heritage

cars to modern streetcars imported from Europe. A streetcar is a proven way to attract 'choice' riders -- riders who have ready access to a car and are not transit dependent."

In Owensboro, it says, "the potential route down Frederica connecting the colleges and universities to the river should serve to provide both consumers and workforce to downtown."

Owensboro's streetcar history dates to Feb. 16, 1887, when four mules were hitched to a 16-passenger streetcar decked with flags, banners and bunting at Second and Triplett streets.

Flags were attached to each mule and a brass band from the opera house led the way downtown.

The Owensboro Daily Messenger wrote that the excitement "from one end of town to the other was almost as intense as when (President Grover) Cleveland was elected" two years earlier.

The next day more than 600 people paid a nickel each to ride the "mule cars."

By 1889, the Owensboro City Railroad boasted 3.75 miles of track, seven cars and 19 mules.

On June 3, 1893, the Owensboro City Railroad Co. switched to electric power. Several hundred people gathered at Sixth and Breckenridge streets, where the barns were located, to see the marvel.

But there were so many delays that it was after 10:30 p.m. before "the first car to which the lightning was chained was run out of the barn and sent flying out to the fairgrounds" -- at 18th and Triplett streets.

One hundred people reportedly rode the trolley that night.

The streetcar lines were extended out Breckenridge Street to Elmwood Cemetery; on Fourth, Triplett and Main streets to the city limits; and Frederica Street south to 15th Street.

Another line ran out West Fourth Street to Sycamore Street, then on Fifth to the city limits.

There were eight miles of track and 10 cars then -- and the cars ran until 10:30 p.m.

In April 1905, the Owensboro City Railroad and the Owensboro Businessmen's Association announced plans to build a "grand boulevard" and trolley line -- six miles long -- "extending entirely around Owensboro and affording excellent factory sites, beautiful residence districts and favorable localities for schools and other public institutions."

Plans also called for extending the tracks to the Deane coal mines at Bon Harbor Hills so they could haul coal to a downtown dock at night.

Financial problems canceled plans for grand boulevard, but the coal shipments began in the fall of 1905.

On April 13, 1934-- Friday the 13th -- a federal judge gave permission for the financially troubled streetcar system to shut down operations. And an era ended.

At 5:40 a.m. the following day, five new 18-passenger buses replaced the electric streetcars.

Twenty years later, on Feb. 27, 1954, Owensboro Rapid Transit, which operated the buses, folded.

On April 16 that year, Owensboro City Bus Lines put buses back on the streets. But that company folded on Nov. 21, 1969.

Then, on Nov. 12, 1973, five new school-type buses rolled out from the old City Hall at Fourth and St. Ann streets at 6 a.m.

Financed and owned by the city, the Owensboro Transit System remains in operation today -- averaging 1,000 riders a day on seven routes.

The buses cover 25,100 miles a month.

In June 1989, the transit system added the River City Trolley -- actually a diesel-powered bus with a trolley body -- to its fleet.

It was replaced on March 30, 2004, with a new 28-seat trolley that cost \$276,000.

For years, the trolley ran up Frederica from the Executive Inn Rivermont to the south Frederica shopping district. Today, it runs from behind Kmart in Wesleyan Park Plaza to the south Frederica shopping centers.

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Owensboro public transportation timeline:

Feb. 16, 1887 -- The city's first streetcar -- pulled by four mules -- rolled out from Second and Triplett Street, heading west behind a brass band.

June 3, 1893 -- At 10:30 p.m. "the first car to which the lightning was chained" -- an electric streetcar -- headed south from Sixth and Breckenridge streets to the fairgrounds, which were then at 18th and Triplett streets.

April 13, 1934 -- The city's privately owned streetcar system went broke and closed its doors.

April 14, 1934 -- At 5:40 a.m., five new 18-passenger buses owned by the private Owensboro Rapid Transit System rolled out to replace the electric cars.

Feb. 27, 1954 -- The bus system folded because people were driving their cars, not riding buses.

April 16, 1954 -- Owensboro City Bus Lines put 12 new buses on the streets.

Nov. 21, 1969 -- The privately owned bus company folded and sold its buses.

Nov. 12, 1973 -- Owensboro Transit System began with five new school-type buses. It was averaging 470 passengers a day at the end of its first year of service. Today, it averages 1,000 a day.