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## Desire grows for streetcars

### Urged by mayors and advocacy groups, US cities and towns are examining the possibility of returning the forgotten vehicles to their streets.

By **Cristian Lupsa** | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

Columbus, Ohio, might not be your image of booming America, but Mayor Michael Coleman says an explosion of jobs and immigration have made it the second-fastest-growing city in the Midwest from 2000 to 2005 (after Indianapolis). Now in his second term, Mayor Coleman is determined to shape Ohio's largest urban area – once No. 3 behind Cleveland and Cincinnati – into a 21st-century city.

His plan includes a streetcar system that would connect Columbus's spread-out downtown attractions, and bring an estimated 6 to 1 return on the initial investment, according to a city-commissioned study. They are riding streetcars into the 21st century? Is this "Back to the Future"? Well, yes.

After Portland, Ore., launched the first modern streetcar system in 2001, cities and towns from coast to coast – impressed by the financial success of Portland's venture – have followed suit or examined the possibility of returning the forgotten vehicles to their streets. While not a solution to traffic congestion or pollution, streetcars have proved to be an attractive amenity to revitalized downtowns, encouraging street life and community, boosting development, and promoting energy-efficient transportation.

"Streetcars aren't going to change the world, but they'll do their part," says Jim Graebner, a Denver-based consultant and chairman of the streetcar subcommittee for the American Public Transportation Association in Washington.

Mr. Graebner was involved in plans for more than 30 streetcar systems in the past couple of decades – half a dozen of which came to be. He says the vehicles are sure to return as cities themselves come back. Streetcars, he adds, don't need dedicated tracks – the tracks are integrated into street traffic. And they're pedestrian friendly.

But this is not a retro-transit fashion fad; it's nostalgia with a grass-roots twist. Most projects are championed not by transit authorities, but by mayors and advocacy groups. They are paid for by public/private partnerships, with little money from the Federal Transit Administration. The FTA continues to fund mostly larger people-moving enterprises, such as commuter rails. Streetcars, advocates say, are for people in growing downtowns, not commuters.

"The streetcar is not a toy or a gimmick," says Charles Hales, a senior vice president of HDR Engineering, a consulting firm in Omaha, Neb. "It's a necessary response to people's return to the cities."

Mr. Hales, who was instrumental in developing Portland's system, says the city wanted to create "development-oriented transit" as opposed to the traditional "transit-oriented development." The former aims to encourage developers to build high-density areas, where driving a car becomes an inconvenience. Couldn't buses, which are cheaper, do the same? They might, advocates say, but "have you seen developers write checks for buses?" Tracks, Hales says, show the city's commitment.

Streetcars fueled urban growth in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but as cars took over after World War II and fueled urban sprawl, most cities uprooted tracks.

Columbus is not a mass-transit city – it's car territory, but Coleman says he is persuaded a streetcar will make a difference to jobs, connectivity, and development. Still, he'll take it one step at a time – having most recently appointed a committee to examine how to pay for an initial two-mile route without raising taxes.

The average price for a mile of track ranges from \$8 million to \$25 million, one-third to one-fifth the cost of commuter rails and subways, Graebner says. The reason more than 40 cities are exploring streetcars today, he says, is that all systems opened recently have produced handsome returns. According to figures from local officials and data advocacy groups:

- Tampa, Fla., spent more than \$55 million on its system and attracted more than \$1 billion in investments.
- More than 100 projects, worth around \$2.5 billion, were built along the \$100-million Portland line.
- The \$20-million line in Little Rock, Ark., attracted about \$200 million in development.
- Kenosha, Wis., with a population just shy of 100,000, built the cheapest system (\$5.2 million for two miles of track). It brought in about \$150 million in development.

Advocates don't argue that streetcars are synonymous with development, but that's missing the point, according to "Street Smart," a recent report by Reconnecting America, a nonprofit that promotes urban development that integrates public transportation. "You want development to happen next to a streetcar so people won't get into a car and drive," says Gloria Ohland, a vice president of communications for Reconnecting America.

In other words, the streetcar helps build denser urban areas. Michael English, vice president of the board running the Tampa system, says the city planned its routes not to take cars off the Interstate, but to provide alternatives to driving short routes. The lines connect Tampa's historic district to a burgeoning downtown.

"We need to rethink sprawl," says Len Brandrup, director of transportation in Kenosha. "We believe in capitalism, but we have few tools to get people out of cars and into public transportation."

And that's the big question: Can streetcars be efficient means of transit? Robert Dunphy, an expert on transportation and infrastructure at the Urban Land Institute in Washington, is not entirely convinced. Mr. Dunphy likes streetcars, but views them as amenities. Most of those operating today – with the exception of those in larger cities such as Portland or San Francisco – fall into that category.

Lisa Gray, director of the nonprofit Charlotte Trolley, calls the local streetcar (currently closed while the city connects it to a new light rail line) an "attraction." It's not transit, she says, but a "moving museum" that happens to serve as transit. Ms. Gray says the vehicles are a great gathering point, and a way for local citizens to connect with the past. "When the trolley was the only mode of transportation, people met their neighbors on it, she says. "This notion of traveling is connected to community."

Streetcar advocates often talk about the trolley's power to create "place." That's exactly why they'll work in downtowns, Hales says. Graebner adds that they are more intimate transportation than buses.

Dunphy says streetcars have a hipper appeal. "People who are users of public transport are fine with buses," he says. "Streetcars are for people who don't use public transportation." Dunphy isn't arguing that streetcars should remain museum pieces, but wonders whether their resurgence can address the American transportation conundrum: "it's a lot easier to get people to support public transit than to get them on it."

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