

Portland's popular streetcars have spurred billions in downtown redevelopment



A Streetcar Named Eugene? **Trolleys would put LTD back on track** By Alan Pittman

The Lane Transit District (LTD) has spent \$25 million on a bus rapid transit system called EmX with plans to spend about \$100 million more in the next several years.

But many question whether bus rapid transit (BRT) is on track. To reinvigorate downtown and promote sustainable transportation, they desire a streetcar system like the ones Portland and a growing number of other cities enjoy.

LTD officials have long argued that streetcars are too expensive and Eugene is too small for them. "LTD is not enamored with rail," the bus agency's board Chairman Gerry Gaydos told the Eugene City Council at a recent meeting.

But light rail supporters hotly dispute that BRT is cheaper than light rail. They also argue that Eugene isn't too small for streetcars and that light rail has many benefits beyond BRT, like spurring urban redevelopment and ridership with more fun.

Cheaper

LTD board member Greg Evans argued that light rail costs \$30 million to \$50 million per mile compared to the \$6 million per mile LTD has spent on BRT. "I think BRT makes the most sense," he told councilors.

But such BRT vs. light rail cost comparisons are widely disputed. The Texas-based Light Rail Now advocacy group argues that when BRT's higher operating costs and lower capacity are compared, "light rail actually gives amazing bang for the buck."

To prove its point, Light Rail Now examined the total 10-year cost of bus vs.

to save on right-of-way costs. Such streetcars can cost about five times less than full light rail systems with dedicated lines.

Some more elaborate BRT systems exceed light rail costs, according to Light Rail Now. BRT lines in Pittsburgh and Los Angeles cost \$50 million a mile compared to light rail lines in three other cities that averaged \$23 million per mile, according to the group.

Councilor Bonny Bettman disputed LTD's claims that BRT was cheaper. "There's never been an overarching, across-the-board cost benefit analysis," she said.

Portland boasts that it attracted \$2.3 billion in sustainable urban redevelopment to the Pearl District with its \$52 million streetcar line.

rail service in St. Louis, Mo. The group found far higher initial capital costs for light rail but far lower ongoing operations and maintenance costs. Overall, light rail was 16 percent cheaper per passenger mile than buses. The group attributed the difference to the need for fewer drivers for larger capacity trains and the trains' far longer lifespan and lower maintenance and fuel costs.

Trolley advocates also point out that light rail can be flexible to save money. Portland, for example, runs its trains on tracks embedded in streets where necessary

"None of that has ever been looked at."

Bettman points out that LTD is proposing an expensive redesign of Franklin Boulevard to add two dedicated BRT lanes rather than the current one lane or no lane along the route. Bettman said the project, including boulevard amenities, could cost \$30 million a mile.

Big Enough?

But light rail opponents argue that Eugene just isn't big enough for streetcars.