

Streetcar Build Blocks Traffic

East side line first of long term plans

BY JAKE THOMAS
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

People trying to get across the Broadway Bridge have found their efforts thwarted. The bridge has been blocked for construction of a streetcar line in what could be just the beginning of a long term project that could change how people get around the city.

The City of Portland and Multnomah County are operating under a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent by the year 2050. Part of achieving that ambitious goal will require changing how people get around.

Last year, Portland was awarded \$45 million in federal funds for a 3.3-mile extension of the Westside streetcar line to the east side. The new line will snake across the Broadway Bridge and then extend south along the Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Grand Avenue corridors.

Portlanders will be able to take their first trips on the street car beginning in 2012. And there could be more on the way.

According to the Portland Streetcar System Concept Plan, the city is also eyeing corridors including Lombard, Hawthorne, Belmont, 82nd Avenue, and other places.

The Obama administration is helping make streetcar dreams possible across the country. Earlier this month, the U.S. Department of Transportation announced it was awarding \$290 million in funding for projects "that will enhance the quality of life in communities across America," including money for streetcars.

More cities could be taking Portland's lead. At least 20 other cities have expressed interest in getting their own streetcar.

The first streetcar expansion tracks were put down in February of this year on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. Since then, traffic all along the route has been slowed by the constant flurry of construction.



PHOTO BY DREW DAKESSIAN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
Construction of the first modern streetcar line coming to the east side of the Willamette River along Broadway and across the Broadway Bridge closes the bridge to traffic through Sept. 3.

"It's caused a lot of nightmares for businesses," said Terry Taylor, the executive director of Central Eastside Industrial Council, of the construction along the corridors.

The streetcar has been touted as a way to draw foot traffic, and bring more customers to nearby businesses. It's also attracted investment along the existing streetcar line. According to a study conducted by the City of Portland Bureau of Transportation, \$3.5 billion in new development has been invested within two blocks of the Westside streetcar since plans were finalized in 1997, which accounts for nearly two-thirds of all development in the downtown central city.

Taylor said that the new line could be a boon for business. He also anticipates that future commercial development at the foot of the Burnside Bridge, called the Burnside Bridgehead Project, could also be a big help for getting more foot traffic.

However, he questions whether the streetcar will likely be a viable transportation option for people on

vacation and taking time off from work, questioning how useful it might be for someone who wants to grab a bite on the central eastside during their lunch hour, and since it will run fairly infrequently.

Taylor also questions how much benefit the streetcar will be for businesses along the MLK and Grand corridors who aren't a retail business and don't rely on foot traffic; or businesses that sell goods that aren't easy to take home on the streetcar.

"It's kind of hard to put a kayak in a street car," he said.

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