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Officials: Downtown rail initiative in MAPS 3 can serve as future framework

Wednesday, November 04, 2009
By Ben Fenwick

Of the nine modes of transit covered in Oklahoma City's Fixed Guideway Study, which is the city's blueprint for its transportation future, only one method of transportation could unite them all — the modern streetcar, riding on rails in the street, city planners wrote.



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"The flexibility and relative low cost compared to other rail alternatives could allow a modern streetcar system to emerge as a viable alternative in any high-capacity transit corridor," states the study, undertaken in 2005. "Modern streetcar can also serve to improve the image of public transportation in the region and is an investment in the future that tends to attract community support. As such, it strengthens the appeal of other transit technologies."

Rick Cain, director of public transportation with the Central Oklahoma Transportation and Parking Authority, or COTPA, echoed the sentiment. "It is the key. It's the place to start, where you can grow from there," he said. "Whether you want to reach out to neighboring communities or expand transit within Oklahoma City, when you come down to the core area downtown, you need some kind of a distribution system, and that's what this really provides. And it will complement our bus system. We run a lot of buses through downtown ... to help disburse people. We're looking at the streetcar to be able to do that instead."

'WORLD-CLASS RAIL SYSTEM'
Not that there wasn't competition, officials said. Train buffs wanted commuter rails or light rail. Bus riders wanted buses. Some planners want "bus rapid transit," which are large buses that run off electric lines on designated lanes in the street.

As the debate over the MAPS 3 shopping list developed, different ideas poured in for transit, said Mayor Mick Cornett. After one survey in which hundreds of ideas were floated, Cornett said the frustration with the City Council and planners was almost overwhelming. He said it was the old "good news/bad news."

"I told them, 'The good news is, transit is just as popular as we thought it was. Bad news is, 20 people have 20 different ideas about what good public transit is.' We can't do it all. We have to build a consensus over how we should start it," Cornett said.

The idea of a streetcar on rails, circulating through downtown, kept coming up. But would people go for it?

Working from the outside, he said, was Jeff Bezdek.

"His group brought the idea forward, and it was the direction we were starting to lean," Cornett said.

No question that Bezdek, a city developer, political campaigner and son of a Texas transit superintendent, is the booster of the downtown modern streetcar. Bezdek said the project, championed by his group MTP (Modern Transit Project), isn't just a bauble for tourists, but that it will take Oklahoma City to a new level.

For Bezdek, the streetcar will be the tracks to making the city a destination.

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"What we are talking about is the start of our first, world-class rail system, a rail system that starts in the center of our city and works its way out," he said. "In our case, with our MAPS initiative, we are writing a check, putting it down and having a system in place in as little as three and a half years after the financing is drawn. ... Presuming that this system is designed right ... we will have an interface in which Amtrak will directly link to the streetcar. Our visitors from Texas, when they get off the Heartland Flyer, they are not standing there stranded with their bags. They can get on the streetcar, ride to the Skirvin and get their hotel room."

Bezdek, Cain and Cornett all said that by building the downtown streetcar line, it is hoped to attract funding for all the other transit options on the table.

Want a commuter rail from Edmond to downtown Oklahoma City? Want one from Norman to Bricktown? Want passengers of a federally funded high-speed rail line to get off at the station in Oklahoma City, ready to spend money in OKC?

"Well, it seems from a city planning perspective that the best way was to develop some sort of rail initiative downtown that could serve as a circulator when people take ultimately the commuter rail from one of our suburban communities, or high-speed rail from Tulsa or Dallas. They've got to have a way to get around," Cornett said.

WHAT WILL OKC GET?

Connectivity doesn't come cheap.

"The total figure for transit is an estimated \$130 million," said David Holt, the mayor's chief of staff. "Understanding that, until you engineer the project, all of this is a rough estimate."

Holt said the rails of the five-to-six-mile streetcar would link together the elements planned for downtown Oklahoma City included in MAPS 3. An "intermodal transit hub" would meet someplace near the Sante Fe Station, if not the station itself, officials said. The hub would include possibly the commuter line to Midwest City; the excursion train to what is called the "Adventure District;" and also include a main stop for city buses. All would eventually be built with a mix of federal, city and/or state dollars.

"It would be impossible, or at least irresponsible, to guess at what those projects may take out of the \$130 million, because there are so many variables — viability, federal contributions, contributions from other municipalities, etc.," Holt said. "But the reason they are included is that those projects are all already viable enough that we can envision them coming to fruition in the next few years, and they are affordable enough that MAPS 3 can be the catalyst to make them happen."

Cornett said streetcar construction costs \$20 million a mile. He also said City Manager Jim Couch agreed to absorb \$2 million of this project's annual operational costs into his general budget.

However, attracting federal funding for such projects is an unknown variable. Recent figures from COTPA showed that federal funding for Oklahoma City's bus system is the lowest among about a dozen peer cities — including towns like Austin, Texas, Kansas City, Mo., Little Rock, Ark., and others. The anemic level of federal funding was blamed on a lack of support from Oklahoma City's Washington delegation by a number of officials.

"When you are talking about downtown streetcar systems, it's interesting to note that there might be federal money available, there might be state money available," Cornett said, stressing the "might." "If you talk transit on a regional basis, there might be money from other regional municipalities available, but what I didn't want to do with this initiative is shortchange it or rely on another funding source. What we've done with MAPS 3 is put enough money in there so that we know we can fundamentally build what will be the largest streetcar system in the United States even if we get absolutely no money from anybody else."

With that, Cornett said, it is hoped that federal funding will follow commitment.

WHAT ABOUT BUSES?

Rick Cain, director of the Central Oklahoma Transportation and Parking Authority, said money from MAPS 3 was originally slated for the Oklahoma City bus system, but was tabled in favor of a smaller-scale study on bus route usage to be paid initially out of the regular city budget.

"There was definitely a lot of discussion about that at one point," he said. "I think we certainly recognize that we do need to focus on enhancing the bus system, but when you start talking about the rubber tire portion of the bus system, that ends up being a lot of labor and ends up getting expensive pretty quick."

Instead, Cain said, planners hope to grow interest in Oklahoma City's sprawling, difficult-to-use bus system by first giving would-be-transit-riders a taste of the rails. The streetcar, he said, will make the bus system work.

In addition, he said, buses, future commuter rail, possible light rail or even the dream of a high-speed rail line are to meet at a point in Bricktown.

An examination of a new transit hub will consider transportation options from the 2005 Fixed Guideway Study.

"If there is ever a commuter rail that connects Midwest City to Oklahoma City, or connects Edmond and/or Norman to Oklahoma City, we would want to have some kind of a station, some kind of a transit hub in the area where it could connect with those trains over in the Sante Fe Station area," Cain said, "some place over there where those trains could connect, where those streetcars and the buses could connect over there. All the modes could connect at one point. There is money projected in the MAPS program to study that."

MIDWEST CITY COMMUTER LINE?

While it rides on rails, the proposed modern streetcar is not necessarily a

commuter line. Sure, dwellers downtown will be able to hop on it and ride to work if they want, but it won't reach to Midwest City.

That's OK, city officials said. Included in the MAPS 3 funding is the speculation that federal money might be forthcoming for a commuter line to Tinker Air Force Base from downtown OKC. In fact, the physical line already exists, unused for decades. Midwest City officials recently applied for a federal stimulus grant to revive the old line with a new commuter train.

"The rail line is already there, and much of it is owned by ODOT (Oklahoma Department of Transportation), which makes it essentially easy to start up service," said Kara Chiodo, a transportation planner with Association of Central Oklahoma Governments, or ACOG.

"We don't have 50 freight trains a day operating on that rail line. It's pretty easy to take it over, rehabilitate it and start commuter service. Sections of the track are over 100 years old, but in surprisingly good condition. There would have to be extensive rehabilitation, but we would not have to completely wipe it and start over."

City planners are serious about the commuter line. Officials from Midwest City, Del City, Oklahoma City, ACOG, ODOT and Tinker submitted the proposal, with an expected budget of \$60 million, said Chiodo. She said Oklahoma City's Fixed Guideway Study makes the funding more possible. "The fact that OKC has this system plan is a point in our favor for federal funding. Many other areas don't have any idea about their future transportation needs," she said. —Ben Fenwick

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