

Trolleys may be jolly, say Minneapolis officials
Rochelle Olson, Star Tribune

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Minneapolis has a desire named streetcar.

The budget for 2006 includes \$300,000 to study whether a streetcar line would work and where it should go. The study has the enthusiastic support of Mayor R.T. Rybak and Council Member Gary Schiff, who see the streetcars as a link to a transit-oriented city.

"We're looking to add more energy to our main streets," Rybak said Wednesday. "It puts us on the cutting edge of American cities, but ironically it also grows out of the city's history. Minneapolis grew along streetcar lines, and that's part of what created the charm of our neighborhood commercial districts."

The City Council enthusiastically agreed this week to study streetcars as part of the city's 10-year transportation plan.

The move comes as scores of cities look at adding streetcars as urban people movers, with Portland, Ore., as the highest profile example of success.

Streetcars are almost identical in size to light-rail transit cars. "We're not talking about a ding-ding historic trolley," Schiff said.

But light-rail trains have their own right of way and are designed to move larger numbers of people longer distances. Streetcars share city streets with regular cars and buses.

Minneapolis leaders dream of a streetcar system that knits neighborhoods together. It could travel along Washington Avenue from the University of Minnesota to a future Twins ballpark in the Warehouse District. It could follow Lake Street, connecting the current light-rail line with the yet-to-be-built southwest light-rail transit corridor. Or it could provide passage for Mississippi River townhouse dwellers to movie houses in Uptown.

"Some combination of light-rail transit, streetcar and buses will be a huge competitive advantage," Council Member Scott Benson said.

Cost, however, will be a concern. Schiff said the early estimate is up to \$75 million in capital expenses for the first line. He said the city would seek money from the federal government and the Metropolitan Council.

The Met Council, which operates the bus system, has no position on streetcars in Minneapolis. "Right now we have not contemplated streetcars in our long-range plan, but on the other hand, streetcars might have some application in certain corridors. If the city wants to look at that, we don't have any objection to that," said Nacho Diaz, director of metropolitan transportation services.

In St. Paul, a streetcar line connecting downtown with the Grand Avenue shopping district has long been supported by City Council Member Jay Benanav, but never gained traction. Recently, a light-rail line along University Avenue, connecting downtown St. Paul with downtown Minneapolis, has become a much higher priority.

Incoming Mayor Chris Coleman didn't promote streetcars during his campaign, but he was intrigued by the idea during his days on the council, Benanav said. He said he hopes to meet with Coleman soon about the streetcar proposal.

A bittersweet history

Minneapolis has a storied, if bittersweet, history with streetcars that involves one of its most prominent early citizens, Thomas Lowry, and one of its most notorious 20th-century characters, the gangster Isadore (Kid Cann) Blumenfeld.

Before the turn of the 20th century, Lowry built what was known as the nation's most efficient system with his Twin City Rapid Transit Co. The cars ran 48 miles from Stillwater to Lake Minnetonka. At their peak in 1922, the Twin Cities cars carried 226 million passengers.

When Benson talks about the dismantling of that system, he all but spits out the words "corrupt deals." Blumenfeld owned 16 percent of the company's stock when the system was sold off piece by piece. Some went to prison for fraud for selling the system's hardware below market rate.

The last mass-transit streetcar stopped running in 1954. At the time, buses were the rage, sold to the public for their flexibility to go anywhere because they weren't tied to tracks.

Once again, the tracks have allure. But now, "having track and having certainty is an important aspect to making transit work" as an urban development tool, Benson said.

Staff writer Joe Kimball contributed to this report. Rochelle Olson • 612-673-1747