



January 2015 Newsletter

Supporting Quality Public Transportation in Atlanta



STREETCARS ROLL!

For the first time in more than 65 years, Atlantans are riding streetcars. The grand opening of Atlanta's first modern streetcar line took place December 30th, just in time to fulfill Mayor Kasim Reed's promise that service would begin before the end of 2014.

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CfPT President David Emory joins the opening day crowd (photo by Joey De St. Aubin).

(Streetcars roll, continued from page 1)

The sleek blue streetcars run between Centennial Olympic Park and the Martin Luther King Historic district every ten to 15 minutes, operating from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, 6 a.m. to 1 a.m. Fridays, 8:30 a.m. to 1 a.m. Saturdays and 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. Sundays (the last round trip begins 45 minutes before the end of service). For the first three months, the ride is free. The new line's mission is primarily economic: it's designed to help revive an area that was cut off from the downtown business district by the I-75/I-85 "Connector" in the 1960s. To reach its true transit potential, this 2.7-mile "starter" line must be extended. Last February, Atlanta Beltline planners proposed extending the line east to connect with the planned Beltline transit loop around central Atlanta. They also proposed several other connecting streetcar routes that would form an integrated transit system across and around the heart of the city. During the ceremonies marking the beginning of streetcar service, Central Atlanta Progress President A.J. Robinson hailed the new line as just the "beginning step of streetcar infrastructure." And he had a message for naysayers who, in his words, "may still have a slight doubt" about the significance of the project. "We did not build it for you," Robinson declared. "We built it because Atlanta is in a global competition for attracting future human capital. We built it so that we have a shot of having our children and grandchildren stay in Atlanta."

ROADS, TRANSIT AND TRANSPORTATION FUNDING

While the construction of the new Atlanta Streetcar line was funded by local and federal dollars, it's likely that some measure of state support will be needed for any serious transit expansion. Transportation funding is shaping up to be a big issue as the Georgia General Assembly begins its 2015 session. A legislative

study completed last month declared that the state should be spending \$1.5 billion more each year on its transportation needs. The study committee proposed several options for generating that money, all of them involving the controversial steps of either raising taxes or diverting existing revenue from the state's general fund. This being Georgia, committee members suggested that most of the new money should go to roads, but they did raise the possibilities of creating an annual state funding stream for transit and eliminating the state-mandated straitjacket that bars MARTA from spending more than half of its tax revenue on operations. Why would the state legislature - - so indifferent to transit for so many years -- change its stance? Georgia's Republican leadership will need to form a coalition with pro-transit Democrats to pass any road-funding legislation. "With the tea party still a dominant faction in GOP ranks," writes Atlanta Journal-Constitution "Political Insider" Jim Galloway, "Passage of any tax hike would fall on the backs of Democrats and a minority fraction of Republicans." Galloway went on to predict that Democrats will demand state funding for commuter rail as the price of their support. It's much too early, of course, to predict how this will all shake out. The "nothing but roads" crowd is already trying to propose new toll lane construction as a transit initiative, promising that toll-paying cars and trucks will share their lines with express buses. Maybe so. But Georgians have a right to insist on true transit expansion, not just road projects disguised as transit.

IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

Now that construction of the new Braves stadium is under way in Cobb County, county officials are finally conceding there may be a downside to thousands of fans driving to get to the park on already-congested freeways.

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Chairman Tim Lee wants Cobb county commissioners to schedule a May, 2016 referendum on a tax increase to fund bus rapid transit between midtown Atlanta and Kennesaw State University, largely running along Cobb Parkway. In a bid to save money, the county recently modified the BRT proposal. It eliminated bridges and tunnels that would have allowed buses to bypass intersections, but it's still not clear whether even this scaled-down proposal will pass muster with Cobb voters, who have a long history of anti-transit and anti-tax sentiment. 40 percent of the Cobb County residents questioned in a recent Atlanta Regional Commission survey described public transit as the best solution to metro Atlanta's traffic problems, but critics were quick to denounce that survey as a meaningless "push poll." If Cobb County fails to take a serious look at its transit needs, it risks being enshrined as a textbook example of what happens when urbanized development is attempted without an urbanized infrastructure.

MARTA CHIEF GETS LONGER CONTRACT

MARTA's Board of Directors is extending CEO and General Manager Keith Parker's contract until 2019. Since joining the transit agency a little over two years ago, Parker has been credited with improving service, increasing ridership, cutting costs, and improving relations with the state legislature. The highlights of Parker's tenure so far include Clayton County's recent decision to join the system, and the negotiation of a new contract that gives unionized workers their first raises in eight years but cracks down on chronic absenteeism. In announcing the contract extension, Board Chairman Robbie Ashe credited Parker with transforming a good transit agency into to a great transit agency.

CALIFORNIA DREAMIN'

Ground was broken this month for a new 200-mph rail line designed to speed passengers between Los Angeles and San Francisco in less than three hours. Here in the Southeast, progress on high-speed-rail has been much more modest. The Florida East Coast Railway hopes to begin running 110-mph passenger trains between Miami and Orlando next year, and Virginia and North Carolina continue to pursue the possibility of building a high-speed line linking Washington, DC and Charlotte. What are the chances of extending that line to Atlanta? The Georgia Department of Transportation began a study back in 2012, but officials say it won't be complete until 2016. Boosters say high-speed trains could cover the distance from Charlotte to Atlanta in two hours and 27 minutes with stops in Greenville, South Carolina and Athens. There also has been talk of extending the proposed line to Columbus. Last year, consultants released a report on three possible alternatives for Atlanta-Columbus rail service.

ALL STOPS

Even though Amtrak's national passenger numbers increased during fiscal 2014, the number of passengers boarding or getting off Amtrak trains in Atlanta slipped 3.4%, dropping to 95,630... New Orleans is beginning construction this week of a new streetcar line through the French Quarter, running along Rampart Street and St. Claude Avenue between Canal Street and Elysian Fields Avenue... Montreal has launched a new commuter rail line to Mascouche, a 65-minute ride from Montreal's Central Station.

Citizens for Progressive Transit
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