The Other L.A. Transit Story

By Rich Sampson

There’s so much of the transportation narrative of Southern California that’s widely known, especially among observers of public transportation, sustainable communities and transit-oriented development. That story ranges from the region’s original development fueled by the Pacific Electric interurban network, the domination of automobile traffic and highways for almost a century and the recent resurgence of high-capacity transit options via the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (known as Metro locally) and Metrolink (for more on rail transit in Southern California, see RAIL editions numbers 4, 11 and 22 – ed). But a new, more subtle wrinkle in L.A.’s mobility story is now emerging through the L.A. Streetcar, a new way to enhance connections in a downtown district that is rarely given its due as the heart of the nation’s second largest metropolitan area.

The combination of Metro and Metrolink – along with Amtrak’s Pacific Surfliner service and a score of other regional transit providers – have been transforming Southern California over the past three decades through a vibrant mix of regional mobility options, a vast network that is still expanding today. Metrolink commuter rail lines move tens of thousands of daily riders in and out of the city’s historic Union Station, and Metro’s Red, Purple, Blue, Expo and Gold lines fan out to Hollywood, Culver City, Pasadena, Long Beach and El Monte. But while many of these routes find their terminals in downtown Los Angeles, their ability to provide local mobility to downtown workers, residents, shoppers and visitors is more limited due to wide distances between stations and train frequencies oriented for travel to and from downtown, not within it. Others claim that L.A. has no true downtown and needs a concerted effort to establish one.

Accordingly, Metro and the L.A. City Council have worked together in recent years to examine how upgraded transit service could better connect downtown elements without the need for costly new subway tunnels. That work coalesced around the Bring Back Broad-
The Los Angeles Streetcar will offer essential last-mile transit for residents, workers and visitors of an increasingly growing and vibrant Downtown Los Angeles,” said Councilmember José Huizar. “By bringing back Los Angeles’ beloved streetcar, we will not only be spurring more than $1 billion in economic development and setting our sights on a prosperous future, we will be reclaiming an important part of our City’s history.”

The result of that collaboration is the L.A. Streetcar, a four-mile loop through the heart of downtown that will link key neighborhoods such as the Financial District, the Historic Core, Broadway, the Fashion District and South Park, as well as the bustling entertainment district near the Staples Center arena and the Los Angeles Convention Center. The team worked with downtown business leaders, property owners and residents to devise a generally east-west running line stretching from the Civic Center area near 1st Street and Broadway to the entertainment district, traversing a set of downtown streets in a clockwise loop through the city center.

More important than lines overlaid on a map has been the work the coalition has done in lining-up investment for the project. Voters throughout the region have been asked to support wide-ranging transit investment programs that have largely been successful at the ballot box.

As a result, the streetcar project would need to find its own stream of funding. A separate nonprofit organization, Los Angeles Streetcar, Inc., was formed to cultivate and promote a Community Facilities District to provide investment for the project. The L.A. City Council approved the District in the summer of 2012 and that December, 73 percent of voters in the District approved $62.5 million in funding for the L.A. Streetcar, which will be matched equally by local municipal bonds along with federal investment expected through the Federal Transit Administration’s Small Starts program. The Los Angeles City Council also voted to support 30 years of maintenance with $294 million in funds through the voter-approved Measure R program.

Currently, the project is navigating the environmental and engineering planning process. A Draft Environmental Impact Statement is expected this spring while the city awaits a decision on Small Starts investment. URS Corporation has been hired as the project’s management consultant. Construction on the $368 million project could begin in 2015, with service beginning as soon as 2018. Latest cost estimates range from $150 million to $162 million for construction, with added underground utilities costs yet to be determined. An accurate overall cost picture should be known in the coming months.
More than 20 years ago, Oklahoma City leaders and voters began to re-invest in their quickly growing city, seeking to revitalize the region’s downtown core. Through a series of voter-approved development initiatives, a plan emerged to not only build such vital amenities as a convention center and arena, but to tie together each of these significant projects through a streetcar network.

“The MAPS plan – as the development initiative became known – created a starting place for regional development,” says Cynthia Reid, vice president of marketing and communications for the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce. “It marks a point at which the people of this region started to invest in themselves and their future.”

In 1993, Oklahoma City leaders turned to a new development plan for their swiftly growing city, which became known as the Metropolitan Area Projects (MAPS) plan. MAPS proved popular. In December of 1993, local residents passed a sales tax to support the plan, which would eventually result in the construction of the Bricktown Canal and other development along the North Canadian River, renovation of a civic music hall, convention center and state fairgrounds; as well as the construction of a new 20,000-seat arena, a 15,000-seat ballpark and a new Library/ Learning Center, among others. In 1998, the original MAPS sales tax was extended for six months, ensuring that all MAPS projects were debt-free when completed.

In the aftermath of the original MAPS projects coming on-line, the need to efficiently connect the new facilities together began to emerge. Many of these projects were visitor-oriented and created downtown congestion
when in use. Concepts for a MAPS 3 plan (the second MAPS effort was MAPS for Kids, a $700 million effort that combined sales tax and school bond dollars to replace or renovate buildings in the Oklahoma City Public Schools, and revamp the district’s transportation and technology programs began to take shape.

In December 2009, MAPS 3 — which ended up being a one-cent temporary sales tax increase for 93 months and which is expected to raise more than $700 million — won a decisive victory from local voters. MAPS 3 includes eight projects that will work to increase the quality of life for all Oklahoma City citizens, as well as create economic growth through private investment and the creation of jobs. Included in those eight projects are a modern downtown streetcar, a multi-modal transit center and 57 miles of new walking and biking trails.

It took nearly four years, but in September, 2013, the Oklahoma City Council agreed on a 4.6-mile streetcar route taking the line along the city’s Santa Fe Depot — which is being rehabilitated via a U.S. Department of Transportation 2013 TIGER grant into an intermodal transportation hub, Automobile Alley, the MidTown residential and business district, the new convention center and arena. The $94.4 million project is expected to be completed by 2017 and will include a streetcar maintenance facility.

From the beginning Oklahoma City and its series of local investment projects got it right. It wasn’t enough to invest in the city through the construction of amenities like a convention center, arena and stadium. No, to take the best economic advantage of these projects the city needed something to tie it all together. That city leaders chose a streetcar line highlights just how far the mode has come in the past two decades — a trip that began with nostalgia and history and that has swiftly moved to economic development, growth and sustainability.

Oklahoma City’s MAPS Modern Streetcar will serve the city’s historic Santa Fe Depot (see above rendering) along with a host of other downtown attractions (illustrated on map at left).