DEDICATED:
Why the Debate About Exclusive Lanes Misses the Point of Neighborhood-Based Transit

By Rich Sampson

There can be little doubt that a substantial portion of the American population desires communities more inclusive of sustainable, livable places, where every trip does not require a car and much of daily life can take place within a well-established, vibrant neighborhood. The data presented in our Infographics section demonstrates these shifting priorities. High-quality transit systems – ranging from subways and metros to high-frequency fixed route bus routes and bus rapid transit (BRT) lines – can serve a vital role in connecting people within and between these activity centers.

Despite these growing preferences towards robust neighborhoods and dynamic commercial districts, entrenched mindsets remain when decision points emerge on the path by which a planned transit service will travel between places. Over the past half century, higher-capacity rail modes – such as heavy rail metros, commuter rail and light rail – have experienced great success in utilizing abandoned rail corridors and highway medians, as well as entirely new alignments, to connect outlying communities with central business districts, a trend likely to continue in the years ahead. But urban planners and elected officials are seeking new ways to utilize transit to circulate traffic within both historic and emerging activity zones where an old railbed or a wide swath of highway aren't available to segregate buses and trains from the traffic grid. City streets are needed to complete routes to and through these communities.

Photo by Rich Sampson

Nighttime is when Washington, D.C.'s H Street corridor comes alive and the forthcoming DC Streetcar line adds to the energy level.

The past year has witnessed heated debates among transit advocates (see here and here, for example) along with very real decisions by public officials and voters at the ballot box where the presence of both streetcar and BRT

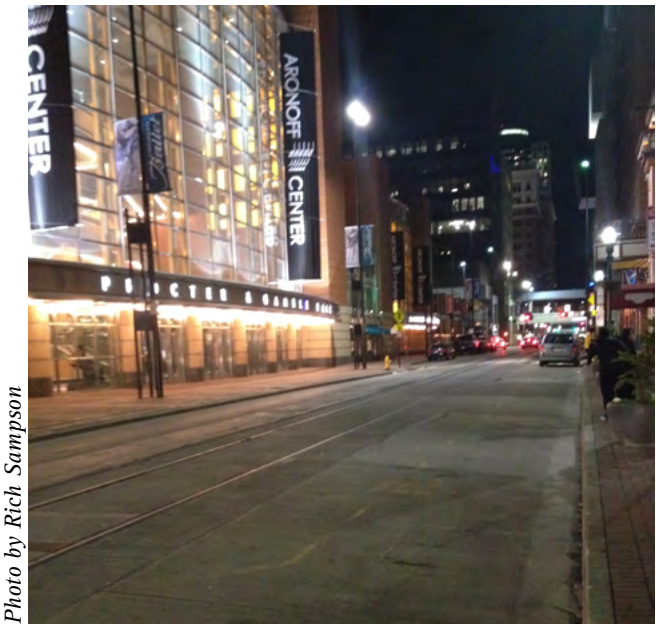

Photo by Rich Sampson

Rails for the Cincinnati Streetcar have already been laid through the city's downtown (above) with a minimal impact on how the roadway functions. Meanwhile, Alexandria, Va., opened a dedicated, two-lane thoroughfare for the Washington, D.C. region's first BRT line, Metroway, this past summer.

Photo by Rich Sampson

vehicles on public thoroughfares has been hotly contested. Should a streetcar or BRT line operate in mixed traffic with other vehicles or are exclusive travel lanes required? Why is achieving dedicated transit infrastructure such a battle? Here, we'll take a look at the issues and values that underpin these discussions and examine some strategies that might lead to a greater success rate in bringing these projects from plans to reality.

The Intersection of Short Memories and Long Timeframes

There's a certain perception that public roads and streets have been the domain of private automobiles since time immemorial and that efforts to designate portions of those roadways to a transit vehicle is a recent fad. Of course, readers of this publication don't need a retelling of the history of streetcars and trolleys in the development of North American cities. In a few instances – Boston, Philadelphia, New Orleans, San Francisco, Toronto – those systems never fully disappeared and remain a crucial element of their region's vitality.

But no matter how compelling those legacies are conveyed by transit advocates, a nearly insurmountable opposition remains by otherwise reasonable citizens and the leaders they elect to returning transit routes to prominence on city streets. Everyone they know drives a car – at least with some regularity – and anything that might impede their quickest path to a destination is an unwanted encumbrance.

At the same time, few people can envision a future where automobiles are a less common feature of daily metropolitan life. Recent free-falls in gasoline prices make peak oil seem further away than ever and those prophesying about cities without cars is someone not sharing their vision of the places where they'll live and work. In fact, for many Americans, tales of the wonder of car-free European and Asian metropolises are not only places they don't visit, they're places they never want their communities to become.

"Many people just don't really care much about better transit," says Washington, D.C.-region transit advocate David Alpert. "They might be okay with it in the abstract, but don't want to spend much on it. A lot of people don't want tax money to go to infrastructure they won't use."

It is at this intersection of constrained recent memories and the immediate future where high-capacity transit services on road infrastructure find their greatest opposition. To be sure, only the slimmest minorities are outright hostile to any kind of public investment in transit service. Even if most people aren't daily transit riders, they're willing to support basic bus routes in urban areas, efficient rail networks in bigger cities and community-based mobility options in rural communities, as countless surveys and local ballot measures confirm each year. The value of living, working and doing business close to transit stations has been continually affirmed as residents and companies pay premium prices for

proximity to good bus and rail service. It's the impact of a new transit project on the routine motion of their community that puts people on guard.

Progress: The Perfect Is Not The Enemy of the Good

As conflicting opinions on the necessity of dedicated transit infrastructure have been raised, proponents of exclusive travel lanes have noted the numerous benefits of buses and trains operating free of other moving vehicles, parked delivery trucks and police cars, ambulances and fire trucks. Indeed, these attributes are self-evident: if a streetcar or BRT line has dedicated lanes, its vehicles will move faster, attract more riders, generate more economic development and be perceived as more successful by the community. These advocates argue that it would be better to not attempt projects that do not include exclusive infrastructure rather than risk opposition that would spill over to future projects and the existing transit network.

"Perfect transit is absolutely a goal, but the perfect must not be the enemy of the good," Alpert wrote for *The Atlantic's* CityLab. "There are plenty of reasons why a streetcar might be worth supporting, even if it isn't as long, frequent, or speedy as we might like."

This view – which is often co-opted by small, but very vocal numbers of transit opponents – is dependent on a vision that high-capacity transit should be oriented and evaluated based on only one fundamental purpose: moving the greatest number of people the greatest distance at the greatest speed. If it fails to achieve all three elements at the same time in the same manner, it's destined for failure.

By suggesting that all transit service be foundationally linear in intent and outcome, this line of reasoning limits out the circulatory benefits that modern transit can play in livable communities. This line of reasoning is why the recently-opened Silver Line in Northern Virginia was built almost entirely on elevated structures rather than in subway tunnels: the bridges and pylons arching through Tysons Corner move its 10,000+ daily riders just as fast as a subway tunnel would have. The problem is Tysons Corner is now saddled with more limited pedestrian accessibility and economic development options than would have been available with an underground line.

Using that same outdated measure, if a streetcar or BRT route isn't moving scores of passengers in rapid fashion from their single family homes to an office skyscraper, it's not a valuable asset to the area's mobility network. That rigid, utilitarian calculus ignores these operations' ability to connect an apartment dweller with dining or retail establishments under a half-mile away or a person with mobility limitations an easy, comfortable ride – with stations and vehicles that don't require lifts or mechanized ramps – boarding a streetcar or enhanced bus instead of reserving a more costly paratransit trip. It's a concept known as Place Mobility.

Place Mobility is not just a vague, airy con-

Photo by Rich Sampson

There can be little doubt that, where possible, exclusive transit corridors are optimal for stations, as seen in Alexandria, Va. (above) and downtown Minneapolis (below). The challenge, however, is what can be done when dedicated paths aren't available.

Photo by Rich Sampson

Photo by Rich Sampson

As seen on Washington, D.C.'s H Street, Northeast, streetcars utilizing shared travel lanes can easily enhance place mobility.

cept," says Robert Steuteville, Editor of Better Cities & Towns. "It now can be measured with walkability. As an investment like a streetcar is installed, and new businesses and people move in, the walkability level rises. The values, activities, and efficiency in moving between these activities rise. That's tangible evidence of Place Mobility – the notion that places can be designed corroboratively to make pedestrian mobility easy, enjoyable and meaningful for everyone. Place Mobility gets people where they need to go quickly and efficiently, but just not very fast."

For these and other trip purposes, the average travel speed and distance traveled per passenger is immaterial. The presence of an upgraded transit service – whether that's bus or rail – indicates a commitment to a neighborhood or district's internal and external vibrancy, one as crucial to an area's identity as the local high school sports teams or a beloved corner shop. In communities ranging from New Orleans' Garden District to Portland's Pearl District and Cleveland's HealthLine corridor on Euclid Avenue, their respective streetcar and BRT lines become part and parcel to what it means to live, work and experience those places. That correlation is not derived from how fast they travel or the number of commuters they take to work, but their ongoing, permanent presence – an element more reflective of civic pride than rapid transit.

"The thing about the streetcar is it's a more emotional attachment," says Gabe Klein, former Director of both the Chicago and District of Columbia Departments of Transportation. "It's about creating place. It's not just about moving through the city as fast as possible."

Recent cancellations of streetcar and BRT projects – for instance, those in Arlington, Va., and Nashville, Tenn., – stem from the inability of project advocates to frame proposed services in the context of these broader manifestations of sustainable communities as well as opposition based on a singular conception of mobility that doesn't apply in every instance.

We Need to Talk About The Frequency

Inasmuch as a narrow, confining view of transit in contemporary communities saddles projects with irrelevant metrics of success, transit planners need to be more mindful of the level of service their proposed streetcar or BRT operation actually achieves. This is borne

New Orleans' St. Charles Streetcars aren't only iconic because of their historic vehicles or grass-covered trackbeds, but because they often very frequently, never more than five minutes apart, 24 hours a day.

out most immediately and impactfully in the frequency of service. While many residents moving within a neighborhood or to a nearby commercial district won't base their travel decisions on a streetcar moving a bit slower than it would take to drive, they might prefer to walk or call a cab if the next vehicle doesn't arrive for another 15 or 20 minutes.

A number of recent streetcar projects have debuted or are about to begin operations with a relatively small vehicle fleet, in some cases just two or three total streetcars to serve their entire routes. The recently-opened S Line Streetcar in Salt Lake City and Atlanta Streetcar, along with the forthcoming DC Streetcar in Washington, have all received criticism that their vehicles don't or won't operate often enough to present a reliable mobility option. And while it's easy to sympathize with project managers under constant scrutiny to cut project costs wherever possible, an infrequently operating system undercuts the sizable public investment that made it possible.

"Providing new transit lines isn't enough – service standards really matter when it comes to attracting people to use transit," says The Transport Politic's Yonah Freemark. "Frequency of service can be just as important as speed, since the frequency at which a vehicle on a line arrives determines how long most people have to wait – especially when they're transferring between services. To create a transit system that is attractive enough to pull people out of their cars, high frequencies of service at all times of the day are essential."

That pride of place engendered by both new and historic transit routes is made possible because they operate often enough that locals don't even need a schedule. Miss a streetcar? No problem, another will be along in a couple minutes. Grab a coffee at the corner shop while you wait. Running a little late for your regular BRT trip? Enjoy the comfortable, enclosed stop in the meantime and the info screen overhead will let you know when it's time to board. This kind of reliable, ever-present transit service is how streetcar or bus becomes more than just a way to get somewhere, but an enriching part of daily life, one that area businesses and residents want to be near.

An Honest Assessment

Much of the fanfare regarding a new transit project centers around the means by which a given vehicle takes through a certain corridor. Too often, those issues cloud the more important discussion of the goals of such an effort, and when those discussions do occur, they're often based on an outdated mindset of what transit is supposed to accomplish. It's about finding the right balance between express and local, and both are needed for a comprehensive regional mobility network. More accurately, contemporary streetcar and BRT projects are intended to strengthen the vitality of existing neighborhoods and foster the dynamism of emerging districts, not hurtle far-flung travelers through them at great speeds. With those objectives in mind, there's no question that service needs to be operated frequently and reliability. When those priorities come together with well-designed and executed service, the impact on communities can be profound.

"Millennials, empty nesters, and others want walkable, livable urban places. Unfortunately, there aren't enough of those in the United States, which is why they're increasingly expensive," says Alpert. "There are plenty of places that could become more walkable and have more of a sense of place. To do that, they need better transit, more amenities, and more residents—which generally means more density. When such a place achieves greater walkability and urbanization, the factors making it so strengthen over time."