



The Seattle Streetcar connects with the Seattle Monorail at the Westlake Transit Hub in downtown Seattle.

# The South Lake Union Streetcar

By Scott Bogren

Last December, the Seattle, Wash., Streetcar – known locally as the South Lake Union Streetcar – celebrated its first year of operation with a two-week period of free rides. The system had much to celebrate, including more than half a million riders in year one, far exceeding expectations.

“A half million riders on just the first line reflects the tremendous potential of streetcars,” says Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels. “A Seattle streetcar network will be an important part of our future, offering a climate-friendly

transportation choice that helps attract employers and encourages more job creation.”

In November, Seattle voters approved Proposition 1 by a healthy 16 percent margin. The initiative is a \$17.8 billion sales tax over 20 years dedicated to transit – interestingly, a more expansive version of Proposition 1 that included highway and road building was defeated a year earlier by the same voters. Part of Proposition 1 will fund a second streetcar line, designed to connect with the city’s coming light-rail line. As with many American cities, Seattle’s foray into streetcars is recreating once was its dominant mode of transport, particularly

along Westlake Avenue and Lake Union.

## Built in Five Days... Lasted 50 Years

The original Lake Union Streetcar was constructed in 1890 in – amazingly – five days. Electric streetcar service had been launched in the city in 1889 – the first on the West Coast – and the decade of the 1890s saw dramatic track expansion throughout the city. Neighborhoods throughout the area saw their initial development as the streetcar arrived and many of the historic streetcar routes remain today as bus lines operated by the city’s transit system, King County Metro.



▲ NORTH Scale: 0 200 400

- LEGEND**
- Streetcar Alignment
  - Streetcar Stop Location
  - Bus Tunnel/Light Rail
  - Monorail
  - Regional & Local Bus
  - Link Light Rail (2009)
  - Westlake Transit Hub



# SOUTH LAKE UNION LINE



a new transportation era in Seattle. In 1938, the Seattle Municipal Street Railway declared bankruptcy. By 1941, the age of streetcars in Seattle was seemingly over, until the appearance of Seattle City Councilman George Benson in the 1970s.

### Benson's Folly

George Benson was a local pharmacist turned public transit advocate who championed a streetcar line along Alaskan Way on the Seattle Waterfront. Benson's life-long affinity for passenger rail can be traced to his early years in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area where he and his family relied on the local streetcar system.

Benson spent the majority of his life running the Mission Pharmacy with his wife Evelyn. In 1973 he ran successfully for city council, having lost his initial campaign in 1971 for the same office. He served on the council's transportation commission for eight years and beginning in 1974 began advocating for a waterfront streetcar line. Initially termed, "Benson's folly," go-ahead for the line was won in 1977 and in 1981 Benson was able to convince waterfront business owners to tax themselves to pay for the streetcar.

Benson's dedication to the streetcar line that would eventually bear his name is best summed up by the fact that he and his wife paid their own way in 1978 to Melbourne, Australia to pick out five wooden trolleys for the line – along with enough spare parts to keep the operation running indefinitely. He even painted the streetcars on the weekends when they arrived on the Seattle Waterfront.

In 2002, the 1.6 mile service was renamed in honor of Benson, who later passed away in 2004. In 2005 the streetcar line service was halted as its maintenance was torn down to make room for a sculpture park. Service along the line has yet to be reinstated – but its role in re-introducing streetcars to Seattle cannot be understated.

### New Leadership for a New Century

Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels, who was first elected in 2001 and then reelected in 2005, first proposed what is now



Photos courtesy of the Seattle Streetcar

George Benson (above) was the driving force behind the development of the Waterfront Streetcar. Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels (below) helped transform that momentum into the Seattle Streetcar.

Eventually, the fully built streetcar system in Seattle encompassed more than 200 miles of both streetcars and cable cars. Vital connections between historic areas like Pioneer Square, the Waterfront, Jackson Street and Yesler Way were the central focus of the early transit network. And with its connections to steamships plying the waters of Elliott Bay and the regions ferry boats, the Seattle streetcar system was an early example of intermodalism.

In 1900, the national utility holding company Stone and Webster began

purchasing the various independently-owned lines that made up the city's streetcar network, and was eventually granted a 40-year franchise to operate the service. Ironically, Seattle was one of the first cities in the nation to purchase and own its streetcar network, for \$15 million in 1919. Mayor Ole Hanson consolidated the entire system under the title: Seattle Municipal Street Railway.

The ensuing years, predictably, did not prove Mayor Hanson prescient. Private automobile ownership boomed, and Highway 99's construction signaled

known as the Seattle Streetcar in 2003. Studies ensued and the project was approved by the city council in June 2005. Construction began a year later and was finished and ready for track testing in October 2007.

Another significant advocate for the streetcar, right from the beginning, was Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen. Allen saw the project as a way to improve the neighborhood of his venture capital firm, Vulcan, Inc. Vulcan and a consortium of other South Lake Union businesses worked in concert with Mayor Nickel and the city council to develop the line and eventually the local businesses and property owners agreed to pay for half the line – \$25 million.

### The Service Launches

The 1.3-mile South Lake Union line of the Seattle Streetcar was opened to the public on December 12, 2007. The line is powered by overhead catenary lines and is currently served by three Czech-built Inekon three-segment articulated streetcars – painted either red, orange or

purple. Each streetcar has a 140-person capacity, has low-floor sections for easy boarding, air conditioning and a passenger address system that calls out stops. The system directly connects with the city's monorail system – a vestige of the 1962 Seattle World's Fair – its bus system and soon-to-open Link light-rail network at the Westlake Transit Hub.

Two of the Seattle Streetcars' most innovative features are its regenerative braking system and NextBus GPS system. The regenerative braking system employs electric motors that are used during a train's braking to send electricity back to the grid. The GPS system allows streetcar passengers to go to the web site – [www.seattlestreetcar.org](http://www.seattlestreetcar.org) – and click on the arrival times link to know exactly when the next streetcar will arrive.

Currently, the system serves 11 stops and takes 15 minutes to go from the Westlake Center Hub to Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center. The Streetcars are operated under contract by Seattle's King County Metro.

### Just the Beginning

Seattle's place in passenger rail history is well-known. From its historic Union and King Street stations to its place along the famed Empire Builder, from operating the first streetcars on the West Coast to George Benson's inspired leadership leading to the Waterfront Streetcar to its unique half-century old Monorail, the city has long been at the forefront of passenger rail innovation.

Today, the Emerald City is poised to recapture its honored past and reconnect its citizens with a myriad of passenger rail options. The South Lake Union Streetcar line is just the first in a proposed succession of new streetcar lines and a light rail system that promise to fundamentally change Seattle. 

The Seattle Streetcar is a precursor to additional streetcar lines in the city, as well as the forthcoming Link light-rail service.



Photo courtesy of the Seattle Streetcar