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# Columbus Navigates

By Rich Sampson

Leaders in Columbus, Ohio had an idea: a new vision for a new Columbus, one designed to manage an increasing population drawn by growth in the health care, education, and insurance industries. Estimates have projected more than half a million more people will be moving to the Columbus metropolitan area over the next 30 years. Mayor Michael B. Coleman was elected in 1999 to help foster that growth and orchestrate redevelopment projects.

But new visions and a larger population need strategies to complement and capitalize on the building momentum. Coleman and other local leaders began to focus on efforts to better mobilize the region for development, and spark revitalization in downtown Columbus in particular. The Mayor and his colleagues quickly realized a crucial element of their approach would not come from some trail-blazing technology or vogue

managerial approach, but rather from a mobility option that had formed the very foundations of early Columbus: streetcars.

Columbus officials investigating how and why streetcars might again drive the development of their city invited RAIL to observe and participate in their work. In this exclusive, behind-the-scenes account, we track the ideas, plans, studies and decisions that constitute the building of a rail system – from the ground up.

## A Project of Unification

At the top of the Mayor's strategy to position Columbus and its downtown for revitalization was a campaign to strengthen the various districts and neighborhoods to expand the core of Columbus beyond the business district.

The urban geography of Columbus is centered around the intersection of its two main thoroughfares: High

and Broad Streets, which meet in the center of town. The Ohio State Capitol building claims its southeast corner, and longstanding high rises on the opposing corners create the heart of the central business district. Columbians are known to refer to the crossroads as "the center of the universe." Streetcars plied those streets, and many others in the metropolitan area until 1947.

Between 9:00 a.m., and 5:00 p.m., on weekdays, the area is bustling with office workers and Ohio State government personnel. As the workers return to their homes in Columbus' outlying neighborhoods and suburbs, downtown activity wanes or relocates to pockets on its periphery.

However, just north of downtown, the Short North district along High Street was experiencing rejuvenation spurred by new restaurants, shops and housing



Broad & High Streets in downtown Columbus, during the heyday of streetcars in 1914 (l) and today (r). The intersection would likely be at the heart of the city's new streetcar system.

# Towards Rail

in restored buildings. Meanwhile, a new convention center took over the footprint of the city's former Union Station and rail yards, while the Arena District sprung to life around the newly opened Nationwide Arena, home to the Blue Jackets of the National Hockey League. At the same time, efforts along Gay Street in the heart of downtown saw street-level retail mixed with new loft apartments restoring 24-hour activity to the central business district. Finally, the city's historic German Village to the south of downtown witnessed restoration activity to maintain the neighborhood's unique charm.

Despite all the effort and investment that focused attention on these vital elements of Ohio's capital city, Mayor Coleman and other leaders noticed a lack of cohesiveness among the disparate projects. In his State of the City speech in February 2006, Coleman

identified the missing link in uniting the various redevelopment initiatives: transportation connections. He noted that while worthwhile efforts were underway to strengthen downtown Columbus, an additional element was needed to connect the projects and maximize their benefits. More than a vague notion of a new transportation service, Coleman offered an exciting new avenue to accomplish this unity, by returning streetcars to downtown.

"We have a good deal of economic



activity happening in and around downtown Columbus, coupled with a vision of a livable, 24-hour downtown," Coleman told RAIL. "Now, it's our job to connect the nodes of activity together and leverage our unique attractions and assets to spur development and unite downtown."

## The Working Group Gets Working

The notion of restoring a streetcar network to Columbus did not end with the Mayor's proposal in a speech. Instead, Coleman and his fellow Columbus City leaders began to flesh-out their ideas for bringing streetcars back to the city. Chief among these follow-up activities was the formation of a working group that would be specifically tasked with investigating a potential streetcar system for Columbus, and developing recommendations to make it happen. Significantly, the group would work with timelines of weeks and months, not years,

in order to avoid stagnation. Coleman pulled together leaders of the business and government communities, community groups and key people working on the various revitalization projects. He also lined-up financial support for the group's work from a consortium of Columbus businesses. To head the group, he tapped retired Admiral Denny McGinn, a former Navy fighter pilot, who now held a key post at the Battelle Memorial Institute, a Columbus-based science and technology firm. For Coleman, establishing the working group was critical to transforming streetcars from a concept to a reality.

"New ideas need advocates, believers and community support to build momentum," Coleman says. "To really get this project moving, we brought together experts and stakeholders from across the community to make sure no good ideas were overlooked and to ensure a solid foundation for moving forward to pitch this to the larger community."

With Admiral McGinn at the helm, the working group went straight to, well, work in plotting-out the role



of streetcars in Columbus. They held their first meeting in April 2006, just two months after the Mayor's proposal, and quickly determined they needed to learn as much about streetcars as quickly as possible. They studied streetcars systems in contemporary use, where and why they have been implemented elsewhere, and how they had been designed and deployed. The group investigated recently opened



Admiral Denny McGinn (below left) leads a meeting of the Columbus Streetcars Working Group (above).

systems in Little Rock, Portland, Tacoma and Tampa for trends and similarities with Columbus. According to McGinn, building a knowledge base was essential to educating and creating support within the community for streetcars, and to develop appropriate recommendations to the Mayor, the Columbus City Council and other elected officials.

"We had to have answers to questions like, 'what is a streetcar,' 'where and why are they being used in other places,' and, most importantly, 'why are streetcars right for Columbus,'" said McGinn. "We wanted to make sure we were all up to speed before we started passing along that knowledge to the various constituencies."

To add to their growing base of information, the group brought in officials from other systems, including Portland and Tampa to describe not only how their systems operate, but also how they created them. McGinn and ten other working group members then traveled to Portland to witness an operating streetcar service firsthand. They returned to Columbus armed with details, ideas and a greater appreciation of the impact streetcars can have on enhancing a community.

"The experience of streetcars in Portland has been quite valuable to us," McGinn says. "They've been so willing to share their challenges, successes and even mistakes as

they went about building their system. Our cities have similar demographics and we've seen how powerfully streetcars can enhance neighborhoods, economic development projects and the overall structure of a city."

Translating the Mayor's vision into maps, budgets and recommendations was the group's next order of business. McGinn organized several subcommittees to put together plans and options on more specific considerations, such as potential routes, vehicles and infrastructure, and funding and economic development. Meanwhile, the group at large fanned-out to community meetings, briefings to organizations, businesses and elected officials and anyone else who would listen to get the word out on streetcars and soften up the ground for when proposals and numbers would be put forward.

"We worked to explain to the community what the vision for streetcars was, specifically in contrast to the light rail effort a few years ago," McGinn said. "Once we increased the understanding that streetcars would be focused on connecting downtown as a circulator and driving economic development, and not a light rail commuter system, we began to find more buy-in."

As the various sub-groups began reporting back with ideas and plans, a clearer picture of the potential system emerged. Responding to the central goal of connecting scattered districts and neighborhoods, High

Street, which connects most of the districts between the Short North and German Village, became an obvious potential corridor. Meanwhile, to facilitate better connections between the Arena District on the northwest edge of downtown and the Campus Row/Grant Hospital neighborhood several blocks to the east of High Street, the group sketched-out several cross-town routing options. Working group members mapped a handful of potential lines – some little more than a mile long, others stretching over eight miles. This brainstorming work focused primarily on attracting ridership and serving the targeted development zones, not as much on factors of cost or infrastructure. The later concerns would be handled by other sub-groups – those specifically tasked with investigating funding and studying vehicles, tracks and other technical details.

#### A Balanced View of Investment

While various lines and routes were being considered, the funding sub-group began to tackle the questions of securing investment for the system. Although exact costs would obviously depend on the route(s) selected, the vehicles, land and infrastructure choices, and operating expenses, the sub-group focused on identifying potential funding sources and how they would be blended to create the right mix of investment to make the system a reality. The group, led by Larry Fisher, President & CEO of the Columbus Downtown Development Corporation – a private non-profit downtown development organization – recognized that since the service would primarily benefit the City of Columbus, the City would need to be a “principal player” in supporting it. This perspective echoed the Mayor’s leadership role in the effort.

“Based on Mayor Coleman’s leadership, the downtown development goals of the project clearly require strong commitment from the City of Columbus,” said Fisher. “We’ll be looking into how we can best achieve

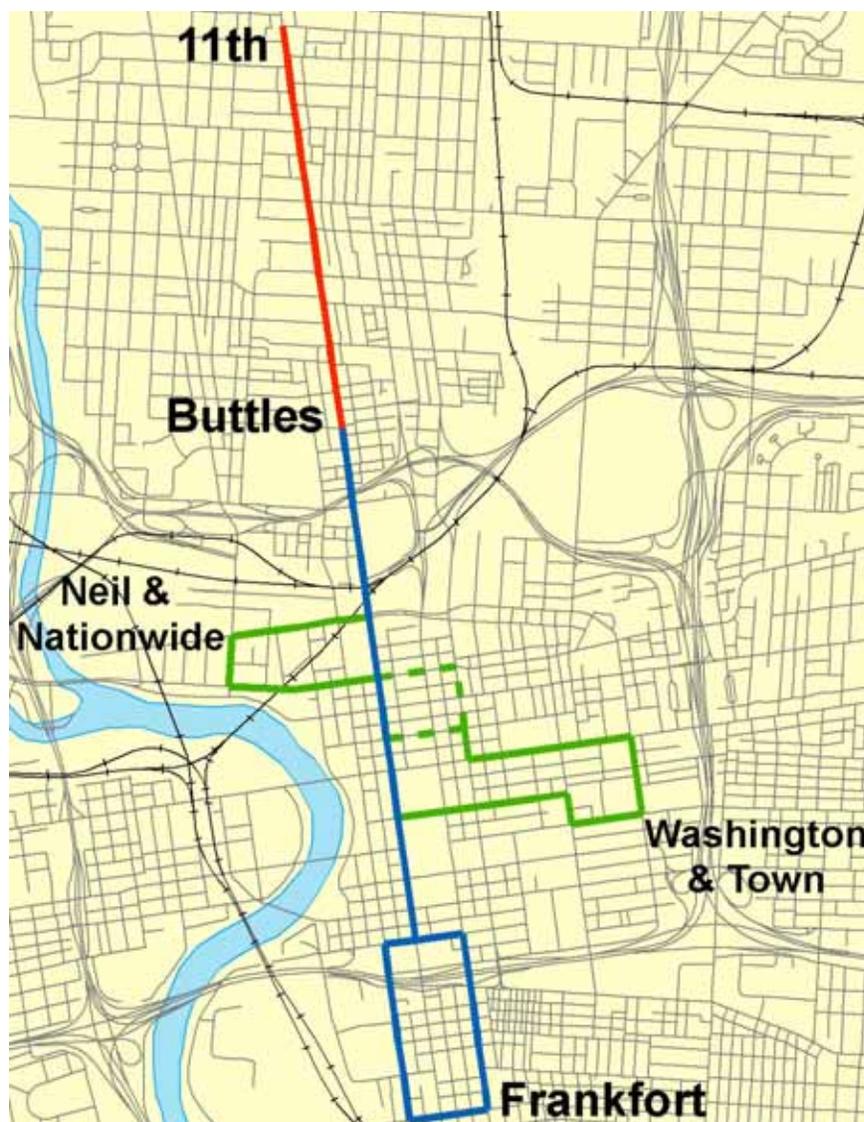


Image Courtesy Columbus Streetcar Working Group.

that, given our resources.”

In addition to the City’s role in supporting a streetcar network, the funding sub-group compiled a list of investment streams at the federal, state and local levels, as well as private investment and other local opportunities. Among these, two avenues of possible funding materialized to augment the City’s likely investment. First, a new federal funding program authorized in the SAFETEA-LU federal transportation law of 2005 caught their eye, which would support new, lower-cost rail and bus systems. A new subset of the existing New Starts program – to be known as Small Starts – offers federal dollars to support projects with a total cost under \$250 million,

among other distinguishing factors. Columbus’ proposed streetcar service could certainly fall within that budget range, and funding sub-group members began to investigate the newly established program’s applicability for their project.

At the same time, the lessons shared by Portland Streetcar officials began to color the funding tableau. Led by U.S. Congressman Earl Blumenauer and others, Portland had built its streetcar system entirely with local funds, including investment from their local business community through a specially created taxing district. Business leaders there had seen the positive impact their existing light rail commuter system had on revitalizing downtown Portland. They recognized



Streetcar service is planned to link development projects in the German Village (left), Convention Center area (middle) and the Short North (right), among other downtown Columbus districts.

that a more focused rail circulator service could further enhance and drive development, especially in the Pearl District collection of underutilized warehouses and industrial plots north of the central business district. Ultimately, through a voting process, downtown business owners authorized a tax of \$11.2 million to help support the project, which was launched in 2001.

Noting marked similarities between the efforts of Portland’s businesses and their spate of ripe development opportunities, funding group members found Portland’s experience might be replicable in Columbus. They began to forge a potential investment strategy primarily based on three important sources: City of Columbus support, federal funding through the Small Starts program and investment from the city’s business community. However, before reaching out to City of Columbus officials, business leaders and federal funders to support a streetcar system, the group planned to develop a finalized plan for integrating all the potential investment streams with more precise costs for building a streetcar system.

“The [funding sub-group] looked at a myriad of options, at all levels of government, and sources outside public funds to support the construction, and then operation of a streetcar system,” said Fisher.

“We did so with the focus that since our overall cost would be relatively low for a rail project, we’d look to sources which maximize value without imposing severe constraints on how those funds could be used.”

#### Building A New Foundation for Rail

Beyond the need for linking downtown districts and driving economic development, streetcars in Columbus would play an important role in reintroducing passenger rail service to central Ohio. The region has experienced more than a half-century of decline in passenger train activity. Columbus was once a dynamic passenger rail hub, with trains of the New York Central, Pennsylvania and Baltimore & Ohio Railroads, among others, serving the city through its Union Station. Built by renowned architect Daniel H. Burnham in the Beaux-Arts Classical style 1897, the station hosted 124 daily trains at its peak in 1906. Passenger service began to recede from that point, and found its demise in Columbus when Amtrak stopped service in 1979. Union Station was demolished in that same year to make room for new highway construction and a potential new convention center. Despite last-minute efforts by local preservationists, only one of the station’s landmark arches was saved from the wrecking ball. It has since

been moved to a new promenade across from Nationwide Arena. Meanwhile, the last streetcars were replaced by buses in 1947. Since then, Columbus, along with Phoenix, Ariz., have remained the largest U.S. cities without any sort of passenger rail service – local, regional or intercity.

According to Mayor Coleman, deploying streetcars would set a strong foundation for return of other passenger rail modes.

“Streetcars could build momentum for Columbus to look at new passenger rail services, such as light rail, commuter rail, and intercity service to other Ohio cities like Cleveland and Cincinnati and throughout the region,” says Coleman.

Indeed, for the area’s other transportation entities, a successful streetcar service could be the starting point for rail services already on the drawing board. For the Central Ohio Transportation Authority, COTA, which operates the public transit system in the Columbus region, any streetcar service would be well integrated with its existing bus network and future plans for a light rail system.

“We would be closely involved in any streetcar operation, to ensure that our bus routes can facilitate good connections with the streetcars, and that the infrastructure could be compatible with a light rail service someday,” said COTA’s Doug Moore.



“That means not only would there be easy transfers between buses and streetcars, but also that the rails, catenary system, stations and other aspects of streetcar operation could be compatible with a light rail system.”

Efforts to restore commuter and intercity rail service would also find strong linkages with the streetcar network. The Ohio Rail Development Commission, a state-level branch of Ohio Department of Transportation, is developing plans to initiate a four-route regional rail network focused around Cleveland, which it has termed the Ohio Hub plan. Columbus would see multiple daytime departures to both Cincinnati and Cleveland under the proposal, where at the latter of which connections could be made to new routes to Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Buffalo and Toronto. It also is investigating a commuter rail service from Columbus east to Newark, Ohio using a state-owned freight rail line.

Although the signature Union Station has been lost forever, these new passenger rail services operating to and from Columbus would require a new gateway station to access the city. Any project to construct a new rail station would be aligned closely with the streetcar network to allow incoming rail passengers a convenient way to reach downtown Columbus’ attractions and neighborhoods.

“The streetcar project fits beautifully with our work to build

intercity and commuter rail service in Columbus,” said Stuart Nicholson of the Ohio Rail Development Commission. “Not only could it spur momentum for passenger rail outside the City, but it maximizes the value of a new station for Columbus. We’ll be sure both projects work together if and when they happen.”

#### A Mindset, Not A Mechanism

From connecting Columbus’ downtown communities to fostering economic development and setting the stage for more and better rail mobility options in central Ohio, Columbus’ work to create a streetcar system bears a message beyond sketching-out routes or choosing vehicles. It’s a banner that highlights

opportunity and potential as its highest priorities. Based on focused leadership by local leaders, both public and private, an energized and thorough working group, and, perhaps, the perfect balance of timing and resources, streetcars in Columbus face strong prospects for becoming a reality. In that sense, the eventual return of streetcars to Columbus would serve as a beginning, not an end.

As Admiral McGinn explains, that effort is based on the fundamental concept that “streetcars for Columbus are a mindset, not a mechanism. They’re a piece of a larger network is establishing a new vision for Columbus.” 

The remnants of Columbus Union Station frame Nationwide Arena and development in the Arena District.

