

## INTRODUCTION

Streetcars are enjoying a renaissance in American cities of all sizes, as both public and private interests have realized the potential for meeting transportation circulation needs and economic development goals through the implementation of streetcar service. In Salem, streetcars have long been a part of the city's heritage – horsedrawn streetcar lines were in place in 1889, before electric powered vehicle were available. In 1890, the Capitol City Railway Company installed the first electric streetcar lines, and by the early 20th century the streetcar system in Salem had grown into an extensive network of lines.

Developers originally built most American streetcar lines, with streetcars serving as the organizing principal behind new communities. As other forms of transit replaced streetcar networks, streetcars were usually replaced by diesel buses, which were broadly seen as less expensive, more flexible, and more “modern.” Salem faired no differently, as buses began to make inroads in the city in 1924 and had completely replaced the streetcar by 1927. Today many of the basic community and economic development principles that fueled the development of early streetcar lines are being revived. A focus on street-front retail, development of core city retail and services, restored demand for living in close-in pedestrian friendly mixed-use neighborhoods and convenient access to transportation are among the factors that have restored interest in streetcar transit.

Another factor fueling interest in streetcar service in Salem is the need for circulation among the major nodes in and around the downtown area, and the desire to continue economic development in downtown. The existing bus network in Salem is designed in a “radial” pattern, which means that routes from various parts of Salem are all designed to come together at a single node – the Courthouse Square transit center downtown. Circulating from one of the major downtown nodes to another is less convenient than longer distance trips from outer areas into the general downtown district.

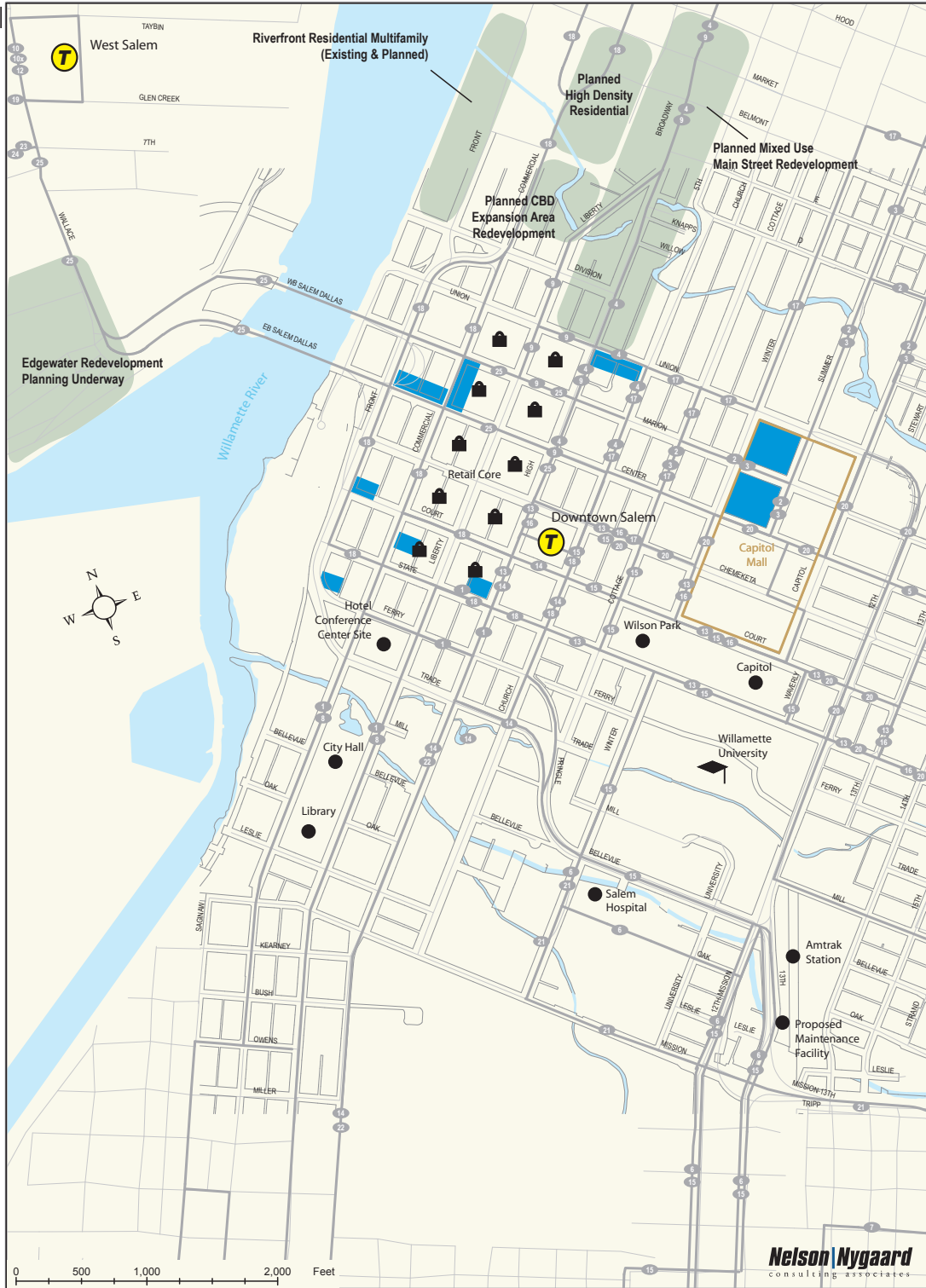
Key destinations within the core area that could benefit from streetcar service for improved circulation include:

- The retail core including Salem Center;
- The State Capitol area, which employs over 12,000<sup>1</sup> workers;
- Willamette University, which serves approximately 2,500 students and faculty;
- Salem Hospital, which employs up to 1,000 workers and has numerous daily visitors, both to the hospital and clinic areas;
- City hall and city government buildings, which employ up to 700 workers;
- Amtrak, the Courthouse Square Transit Center and other regional transit connections; and
- Potential future connections between West Salem and the Salem core and between downtown and Keizer.

Figure 1-1 shows the primary existing circulation needs in central Salem, as well as areas with significant economic development opportunity.

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<sup>1</sup> According to recent survey conducted by City of Salem Community Development Department.



**Figure 1:**  
**Key Destinations and**  
**Development Opportunities**

**Legend**

- Shopping Areas
- Universities
- Key Sites
- Potential Redevelopment Areas
- Downtown Infill Potential (Surface lots or vacant buildings)
- Existing Bus Routes

Base Map Data Source: City of Salem

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## OVERVIEW OF STREETCAR OPERATIONS

This section describes the characteristics of streetcars, compares streetcars to other transit modes, identifies conditions that support successful streetcar routes, and describes streetcar projects in other cities that may be relevant in Salem.

### Streetcar Characteristics

Streetcar service is a unique mode of transportation that is well suited to specific environments and needs. Figure 2 compares streetcar operations to bus technologies.

Key characteristics of streetcars include:

- **Streetcars generally attract at least 15 to 50 percent more riders than bus routes in the same area. In many cases, the difference in ridership is much higher.** Based on recent North American examples of streetcar implementation, there is clear ridership boost that can be attributed directly to the implementation of streetcar replacing bus service in a given corridor. In Toronto, on routes where streetcar service replaced a nearly identical bus service, ridership increased between 15-25 percent. A particularly dramatic example can be found in Tacoma, where streetcar service is running on a future light rail transit (LRT) alignment. Transit ridership in the streetcar corridor increased by over 500 percent compared to the bus route that ran previously. The route charges no fares and offers free parking, conditions that were present on the previous bus route as well.
- **Streetcars often attract private funding.** Property owners are often willing to financially contribute to a streetcar system because they realize the value that a streetcar brings to their property and to the neighborhood. In Portland and other cities, private owners were willing to “tax themselves” either through fees, benefit districts, or other forms of exactions to receive the benefits of a fixed streetcar system. Seattle’s existing Waterfront Streetcar was partially funded through a Local Improvement District, with a new LID proposed for the South Lake Union area.
- **Similar to other street-running modes, streetcars are generally focused on serving destinations**

**within a neighborhood, not just moving through it rapidly.** While streetcars can benefit from many of the same treatments that would be implemented to improve speed on other modes such as signal preemption, queue jumps, longer stop spacing and exclusive right of way, modern streetcars typically have minimal priorities over other vehicles and are often designed to operate in mixed flow with vehicular traffic. Streetcar stops are generally spaced closer together than light rail or bus rapid transit, because streetcar service is designed for local circulation and connections to higher capacity services rather than providing high speed or high capacity service themselves.

- **Streetcars provide a visible and easy to understand routing which attracts new users.** Rail systems in general provide a physical presence on the street that is easy to comprehend. Riders can stand at a stop and literally see where the line comes from and where it is going. Streetcar routes generally make few deviations from a straight path, giving the user more confidence. Visitors and occasional users are more inclined to use them, since there is less confusion about the streetcar than about taking one of many possible bus routes.
- **Streetcars attract both a visitor market and a local user market to transit.** The fact that streetcars are easy to “understand” and often operate in areas with high visitor populations, helps attract visitors as well as local riders. Modern streetcar operations often use “vintage styled” vehicles, or may actually use rehabilitated vehicles from earlier eras (such as the existing Waterfront Streetcar in Seattle). Some systems use very modern, but distinctive vehicles. All of these vehicle types help attract visitors, as well as local riders, to transit.
- **Streetcars catalyze and organize development.** Throughout their history, streetcar lines have been an organizing principle behind new development. Streetcars can help create dense pedestrian environments where access to local streetcar stops is possible by foot. Historically, bus routes are added once an area has developed and the demand is in place.
- **A number of cities with more recent streetcar investments credit the streetcar with catalyzing infill development.** Since the decision to build the

streetcar was made, over \$1.7 billion in new development has occurred around Portland's streetcar line including retail, office and housing. In Memphis, 4,000 residential units have been built within a block of the streetcar in a formerly underused industrial area. Although it is difficult to know whether development would have happened at the same pace without the streetcar investment, it appears that the streetcar line provided a "focus" which organized development and assured the transit focus of new development along and spreading out from the streetcar corridor.

- **Streetcar costs are higher than bus infrastructure, but lower than light rail.** The cost for streetcar construction is approximately \$20-\$40M per mile and \$2.5-3M is typical for each car. By comparison, a rubber-tired trolley costs less than \$500,000 per vehicle and does not require rail infrastructure, but generally does not generate the ridership or private investment associated with streetcars.
- **Streetcars in the U.S. generally operate in "single car operation" and cannot be considered "high capacity transit" except at very high frequency.** Although there is a range of streetcar types operating today, the most common streetcars generally have capacities in the range of an articulated bus – around 60 to 70 seated passengers and a maximum of 110 passengers (seated and standing). Unlike light rail service, streetcars are generally not strung together in "trains" with a single operator, but rather, operate as single cars on the track. Therefore, streetcars cannot be considered high capacity transit based on the number of people who can be served at one time with one operator.

**Figure 2 Streetcar, and Bus Technology Comparison**

Characteristic	Streetcar	Bus
<b>Capacity</b>	Higher capacity, generally comparable to an articulated bus. Seated capacity ranges from about 45 to 65 passengers.	Low to medium capacity, depending on size of bus, which can range from shuttle to articulated coach. Seated capacities range from less than 20 passengers for the smallest shuttles to about 60 passengers for an articulated bus.
<b>Flexibility</b>	Less flexible fixed infrastructure.	Very flexible with minimal fixed infrastructure.
<b>Operating Environment</b>	Can operate in street or on dedicated ROW.	Can operate in street or on dedicated ROW.
<b>Ability to Attract Choice Riders</b>	High – rail services attract 15-50% more riders than equivalent bus routes, and 25-75% more choice riders in route-by-route comparisons.	Low – Standard bus services tend to attract fewer choice riders than streetcar services.
<b>Optimal markets</b>	Circulator and connector to regional services. Closer stop spacing, reliability and visibility are more important than high speed or high capacity. Mixed uses including tourist and recreational areas.	Local and longer distance commuter trips or other trips that are repeated frequently. Also well suited to areas where travel demand patterns are not yet established.
<b>Capital Costs</b>	Medium capital cost - \$20 - \$40 M per mile.	Lower capital cost of \$2-\$8 M /mile for overhead wire.
<b>Operating Cost</b>	Operates at a premium to bus service – generally 35-50% more per hour than bus service.	Lower operating cost per hour. Salem's bus costs are approx. \$70/hour.

### **Conditions for Successful Streetcar Implementation**

Given the characteristics of streetcars and its comparison to bus service, it is possible to develop a set of conditions for successful streetcar implementation. The conditions below are based on comparing streetcars to other modes and on

researching streetcar systems in other cities in North America. A summary of the peer cities' information is provided in Figure 3. While it is not necessary to have all of these conditions to implement a streetcar system, the most successful operations will have the most conditions in place:

- **Demand for relatively short trips where speed is not a critical factor.** Streetcars are an especially good application for point-to-point trips in a dense mixed-use environment. These trips do not necessarily need to be fast, because the distances are not great, and there may be no time advantage to using a faster mode (such as subway) because of the greater distances between stops, resulting in increased walk times. For example a car may be slightly faster, but if time is lost finding and paying for a parking space, the total trip time may be the same.
- **Demand for connections to the primary transit network and neighborhood circulation.** Experience in other cities points out the role of streetcars as neighborhood circulators working in concert with regional transit. In Toronto and Tacoma, boardings at regional transit stops served by streetcars have increased by over 25 percent where streetcars replaced bus service. In Tacoma, there was a significant increase in boardings on Sounder's regional commuter rail service after the opening of their streetcar line. Many cities with streetcars reported that passengers who now ride streetcars after transferring from regional routes had previously been reluctant to transfer to buses for their distribution trip.
- **Lack of extreme congestion on streetcar streets and limited competition with high capacity services.** Where streetcars operate in mixed traffic, reliability will be vastly improved if there is less congestion on the street and limited opportunities for traffic to impede the movement of the streetcar. In addition, because streetcars operate within the traffic lane and generally stop in traffic, streetcar operations should be separated from other higher capacity or high frequency routes operating on the same street to minimize competition for space between the modes.

- **Demand for high frequency service, but without the capacity demands required for light rail.** Streetcars are generally not connected into multi-car trains and therefore do not offer the high capacity of a multi-unit light rail train. Streetcars can offer a convenient frequent service, allowing riders to expect a vehicle to arrive within a few minutes of their arrival at the stop. Streetcar systems operating around the country typically run no less frequently than every 15 minutes, and should be designed to operate reliably at that frequency. For a streetcar system, adding frequency, rather than increasing vehicle size, is the means to meet increased demand.
- **Mixed uses or a variety of markets.** Streetcars are especially good at serving multiple user markets on a single line, rather than being focused on a single market like commute trips. Short workday trips can be served along with trips for recreation, errands, and tourist activities.
- **Presence of tourists and occasional users.** Streetcars encourage visitors and other occasional users to take transit, especially if it connects local and regional destinations.
- **Desire to accelerate planned development.** A streetcar alone cannot catalyze development in an area that does not meet the economic criteria for change. However, in areas that are likely to develop, a streetcar can accelerate and organize the development, ensuring that it will be transit-oriented from the start.
- **Property owners willing to contribute to the success of the streetcar.** Property owners who are willing to participate in all aspects of the streetcar, especially in its financing, will be more willing to ensure its success, and to orient development to take advantage of the streetcar infrastructure.

### **Streetcar Experience in Other Cities**

Over a dozen North American cities have streetcar systems that have either been expanded or initiated operation in the past 15 years. In addition, at least twice as many other cities have new systems or new lines under active planning. The primary attractions to streetcars are the ability to add a visible rail system at a minimum capital investment, and the ability

to create a circulator that connects into a high capacity network without requiring additional extension or expansion of the more expensive high capacity mode. Streetcars are also popular because they are a good fit for densely developed, pedestrian-oriented, urban neighborhoods.

Figure 3 provides basic streetcar operating information for several peer cities and the text below describes experiences in Memphis, Kenosha, Tacoma, and Tucson. It should be noted that no two cities are exactly alike. When using peer information to project results in a different city, it is important to understand all of the issues that make the cities different, as well as alike.

Appendix A provides additional information on how peer systems fund capital construction and operating expenses.

### Memphis, Tennessee

As part of a downtown revitalization effort, Memphis converted a failing downtown pedestrian mall into a streetcar line using vintage streetcars. Buses running down the mall were considered, but rejected as incompatible with high pedestrian volumes. The initial streetcar line began service in 1993. It was 2.5 miles long, mostly double-tracked. Streetcar served the mall, but also ran beyond it on both ends to serve areas that were expecting economic development. Outside the mall, the streetcars ran on the street, sharing a lane with automobile traffic. In 1997, the initial line was converted into a loop by adding a parallel line, running mostly on an old railroad track. The addition brought the total system up to a length of five track miles. All but one of the streetcars are renovated historic vehicles. As elsewhere, the antique cars in Memphis have proven reliable in regular service.

In 1994, annual ridership on the Memphis streetcar system was 468,115; in 1999, it was 922,475, and in the year 2000 it rose to 941,011. By 2000, the streetcars carried almost three times more passengers per revenue mile than Memphis's buses.



Memphis Streetcar

A study of the Memphis streetcar line by Thomas Fox, the system's Director of Planning and Capital Projects, notes that:

- **Monday through Thursday** ridership is comprised mainly of downtown workers and residents who use the system on a regular basis.
- **Friday through Sunday** ridership is more dependent on the cultural, recreational and shopping activities that occur downtown.
- **Saturday** is the highest ridership day, contrary to common transit experience.
- **Individual day** ridership peaks generally coincide with major events in the downtown area such as the Beale Street Music Festival and Memphis Redbirds (Triple A) baseball games at AutoZone Park, and cultural exhibits at the Cook Convention Center.

An on-board survey of streetcar riders in Memphis taken in 1994 found that:

- Almost half of the streetcar riders chose streetcar "for the experience" and would otherwise be making their trip by car.
- 83 percent of streetcar riders did not ordinarily use public transit, suggesting that streetcars can attract riders that similar bus services cannot.
- 36 percent of riders had incomes over \$50,000, and a total of 14 percent had incomes below \$20,000, which further suggests that streetcars attract a wide range of riders.

Ridership has grown for a variety of reasons, the most important of which is the gradual growth and diversification of development in the areas served by the streetcar. Since 1990, residential population along the line has expanded from fewer than 1,000 to more than 5,000 people. Developments such as AutoZone Park (baseball), Peabody Place (entertainment retail), Gibson Guitar Factory and Museum, and numerous restaurants, clubs, and hotels, have resulted in downtown becoming much more of a cultural and entertainment destination than it was previously.

Interestingly, Memphis is using the success of its streetcar system to plan a more regional light rail system. As planned, the streetcar system will constitute the downtown circulation for the larger system, replicating the system currently in place in cities like Toronto. By starting with streetcars, Memphis city officials believe they established the market for rail transit service at a lower initial investment cost, and created the understanding of how rail could serve regional as well as local needs. Once light rail is built, the existing streetcar will continue to provide a functional downtown circulator that complements the regional system.

### **Kenosha, Wisconsin**

The Kenosha Streetcar was conceived as a circulator system to connect the older downtown and the Metra commuter rail station with a mixed-use area just east of downtown. Integral to the streetcar project is a transit center that also serves as the car barn/museum for the historic trolleys and as a downtown transfer station for Kenosha's fixed route bus system.



Kenosha Streetcar on grassy median.

The streetcar serves HarborPark, a redevelopment project being built on a 70-acre plot that formerly was a large Chrysler auto plant. The plant has been razed, and the site is surrounded on three sides by Lake Michigan. The streetcar was planned from the beginning as an integral part of the project. The line opened in June, 2000, and cost approximately \$5 million (including the transfer facility).

The system is a loop of single track, 1.7 miles long, which run from the Metra station to a park on the tip of the peninsula. The Streetcar runs largely in mixed-flow street right-of-way for one-quarter of its length; the remainder is in its own right-of-way. It serves the HarborPark development, as well as municipal buildings, a retail district, and a museum. City staff estimate that the HarborPark development is 75 percent built out.

Five refurbished Toronto streetcars serve the system, and each has been painted in the color scheme of a different city's historic streetcar system. The system runs every 15 minutes,

with different hours during the summer and winter. Summer hours are 11-7 weekdays, 10-5 on weekends. During the winter (January-April), service is reduced to four hours daily - 11-4 PM. Its most popular days include July 4, when many patrons ride the trolley to the park for a fireworks display.

While the Kenosha system was initially conceived to serve various markets, it has evolved to be largely a tourist attraction and mid-day circulator. Its hours of operation have been cut back from its initial schedule due to low patronage (particularly in the winter months) and operating costs. Its hours do not support commute traffic from the new residential development at HarborPark. There are no current plans to expand or extend service.

Kenosha presents a cautionary tale for small cities considering streetcars. While the system is very popular with residents and visitors alike, and now is integral with the identity of Kenosha, the initial thought that the system would operate synergistically with urban redevelopment has not been supported. It is apparent that the density of development in Harborpark (300 housing units and 120,000 square feet of commercial space), and the level of retail and employment activity in downtown Kenosha is not high enough to support the operating costs of the system as a fully functioning transit system.

**Tucson, Arizona**

In Tucson, Arizona, Old Pueblo Trolley, a non-profit organization, was founded in 1983 with the goal of bringing a vintage trolley to Tucson as part of the 1985 University of Arizona Centennial celebration. The group was able to implement a short single-track line along Fourth Avenue, which was later extended east on University to the main gate of the University of Arizona. The line stops short of downtown, due to original funding constraints, and this has limited ridership.

The present line is electrified single track, about 1 mile in length. There are nine stops along the route. The route serves the Fourth Avenue Business District, which consists



Siteplan of HarborPark. Streetcar operates on loop.



Tucson Old Town Trolley.

Figure 3 Peer Streetcar Systems

City	Population	Agency/ Org.	Ann. Rev. Hrs.	Ann. Riders	Total Fleet	Avg. Op. Speed	Peak Headway (min.)	Year Imp.	Most Recently Opened Line	Length in miles	Const. Cost?	Replaced Bus Line/ Other Mode?	If Yes, Ridership Increase over bus line?	Modes in System	Streetcar connected to other modes?	Believe Streetcar improves ridership on other modes?	Other Points
Astoria, OR	9,800	Astoria Riverfront Trolley Association	2,715	30,000	1	N/a	N/a	1999	1999	N/a	\$30,000 (nearly all volunteer labor)	no			No	No	Operated primarily as a tourist attraction by a non-profit. Uses historic trolley car powered by diesel generator it pulls along, no overhead lines.
Charlotte, NC	540,000	Charlotte Trolley	1,450	40,000	1	10-15 mph	5	1996	June 2004	1	\$40 M purchase & rehab	no		Bus and streetcar now, light and heavy rail under construction	separate systems, but routes overlap	Unproved at this time, but Charlotte Trolley believes it is the best marketing tool that Charlotte Transit has	The streetcar is currently run as an attraction, not as transit. Once the corridor is completed, service will be available 7 days/wk (now runs on weekends only). Property values surrounding track increased from \$232M in 2000 to \$440+ M in 2004. The opening of a modern streetcar to running through Charlotte's CBD is planned for 2008. The \$70M project will connect the CBD, the LRT/trolley line, two multimodal centers, a major hospital, and a university.
Galveston, TX	57,000	Island Transit	3,420	55,000	4	N/a	N/a	1988	1995, loop through the Strand. Current construction of extension to Medical Center.	5.2	\$20 million, current extension \$4.5 million	No direct replacement	Primarily tourist, not a market for the bus	bus	yes	Very limited	The streetcar currently serves a "98% tourist and visitor market running a loop between downtown and beachfront hotels. Current 2 mile extension to UT Medical Center aims to serve more local riders.
Kenosha, WI	137,000 (county)	Kenosha Transit Agency	2,480	N/a	5	10 mph	15	2000	2000	1.7	\$4million streetcar, \$1 million transit center	no	N/a – new service	Bus, Commuter Rail	Commuter Rail Station (to Chicago)	Unproven, but does provide direct connection to popular METRA Commuter Rail Station	The streetcar system is currently serves to connect the downtown and commuter rail station with the HarborPark area, a redevelopment of a former car factory for a waterfront park, museum, and housing. The system is used mostly in the summer as an attraction, with operating hours from 11 AM – 7 PM on weekdays, 10 – 5:30 on weekends.
Little Rock, AR	183,000	Central Arkansas Transit Authority		Not open	3			2004	Not yet open	2.1	20 million total, includes vehicles, maint. facility	no	N/a	Bus	Yes	unknown	Connects historic district in downtown Little Rock to sports arena in downtown North Little Rock; intended to serve as downtown circulator and tourist attraction. Future extension to Clinton Library planned. (.8 miles)
Memphis, TN	645,000	Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA)	128,440	1 M	20	7.5 mph	5	1993	2004: Madison Line	2.2	\$57M <sup>(5)</sup>	bus route diverted, not replaced	Ridership has been good; high percent of "choice riders"	Bus, streetcar	connects to the buses at the terminals	yes, most definitely even though the system is pretty small (i.e. downtown circulator)	The streetcar brought vitality back to downtown Memphis (see text for specific developments).
Tacoma, WA	193,000	Sound Transit (ST) Regional Agency	15,000 <sup>(2)</sup>	750,000	3	12 mph	10	Aug. 2003	Aug. 2003	3.2	\$80.4M <sup>(6)</sup>	bus route	There has been a 500% increase in ridership.	Bus, streetcar, heavy rail	connects with the local buses, express buses and commuter rail	Sounder ridership has steadily increased resulting from many issues, including starting of Tacoma's streetcar.	The Tacoma LINK is a free service that connects downtown attractions to a transit hub and parking garage. (Previous bus service was also free.)
Tampa, FL	303,000	Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority (HART)	17,329	420,023	8	6 mph	15	2002	2002: TECO	2.4	\$53M <sup>(7)</sup>	no		Bus, streetcar	streetcar connects w/bus system at the southern terminus & has stations close to cruise ship docks	HART believes the streetcar and bus modes 'feed' each other.	
Tuscon, AZ	487,000	Old Town Trolley	1,144	~40,000	1	N/a	N/a	1993	1993	1	N/a	no	no	bus	Yes	Marginally, due to limited operation hours	Have studied an extension further into downtown. Limited by costs and by current non-profit organization that depends on volunteers for operation

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of numerous small shops, boutiques and eateries, and links these venues with the University. One car is currently available, and others are in the process of restoration. The system began operation in 1993 using a car that had been restored by Tucson volunteers.

The line operates year round on a weekends only basis. It runs Friday nights from 6:00 PM until 10:00 PM; on Saturdays from Noon until Midnight; and on Sundays from Noon until 6:00 PM. Fares are \$1.00 for adults and \$0.50 for children on Friday and Saturday, and a flat \$0.25 per ride on Sunday. All-day passes are also available. The trolley is run and staffed by volunteers with Old Pueblo Trolley.

The Old Town Trolley, given its hours and limited scope, is clearly run as an attraction more than as a transit system, although the line serves as an important tourist and visitor link among the venues along both Fourth and University Avenues. Service is largely limited by the availability of volunteers to operate the line, and by having only one car. The major problem is that the line does not serve the downtown, and is isolated from that area both physically and visually. The limitations of volunteer operators also prevent the line from fully meeting the service demand.

### **Tacoma, Washington**

On August 22, 2003 Tacoma opened its new downtown streetcar circulator called Tacoma Link. It is similar to the downtown streetcar line in Portland, which was the first new generation streetcar line equipped with modern streetcars in the country. Like Portland, it uses modern Czech-built Skoda streetcars, each 60 feet long with room for 30 seated passengers and 56 total passengers. Tacoma bought three cars for the service, two of which are in operation during peak service.

Tacoma's line connects the commuter rail station at its hub with the Tacoma Dome, the Convention Center, and with the downtown office and theatre districts, as well as the University of Washington in Tacoma. The line is 1.6 miles in length; about half of the line is double-tracked. The entire route was



Tacoma Streetcar.

not double tracked due to community concern about loss of parking and street right of way. In this initial phase, this does not represent an operational problem.

The streetcar runs along street right-of-way, but on a slightly raised grade, except at intersections, which gives the system its own right of way. The streetcars have traffic signal priority along the route, so the end-to-end trip is only eight minutes, an average of 12 miles per hour, including stops. The streetcar runs hours similar to regular transit service in Tacoma, from 5 AM to 8 PM weekdays, 8AM – 10 PM Saturdays, and 10 AM- 8 PM Sundays and holidays. All service is run on a 10-minute headway (two cars in operation) except for early AM and late PM on Sundays, when one car is running and headways are doubled.

The Tacoma Link is a free system, replacing a downtown bus circulator that was also free. Initial ridership has exceeded expectations, averaging 2,400 riders/day by late 2003, significantly more than the bus system it replaced. The pre-opening forecast had been for 2,000 riders daily by 2006.

With the support of Sound Transit, the City of Tacoma adopted a plan known as Destination Downtown that includes a new zoning code to encourage property development around the streetcar line and a future light rail line. In concert with installing the streetcar, Tacoma also made improvements to sidewalks, pedestrian lighting, street trees, benches and community kiosks, all to highlight downtown as a vibrant destination.

With the early success of the system, planning is already underway for extensions.