

A Desire for Street Cars

Proponents say it could spur economic development

By DERRICK GINGERY

A new idea to expand Fort Wayne's public transportation system includes an old way of getting around.

Building a network of street-car routes throughout the city eventually could lead to more family disposable income, a new report suggests. The proposal is intended to entice residents to stop driving their cars to work, which could cut household gasoline and other transportation costs and leave more income for other purposes.

With the state's average wage below the U.S. average and gasoline still pricey, this is a way to improve the city's affordability, said Wendy Barrott, Fort Wayne director of energy and environmental services.

"As we move forward in a world of high gas prices, we want to provide people with choices," Barrott said. "Driving takes part of our income. We're kind of driving ourselves into the poor house."

A new street-car system would complement the Citilink bus system, but could resemble what was in place in the early 20th century. In 1929, street-car use in Fort Wayne peaked at 22 million trips, according to the report "Reconnecting Fort Wayne: Building a Sustainable Future on an Innovative Past."

Consultants Scott Bernstein and Stephen Perkins, of the Chicago-based Center for Neighborhood Technology, envisioned street cars connecting college campuses, neighborhoods, shopping and other attractions.

The consultants are expected to present their findings, which include recommendations on bus use, links to Fort Wayne International Airport, hourly car rentals and improvements in energy efficiency, to city civic and business leaders at an event later this month.

Any formal street-car proposal is far from being finalized. The consultants' report lists no costs and suggests gauging feasibility first.

A new street-car system would require rails to be installed and electric wires to be strung over roads to power the cars.

Barrott said she did not expect streets to be widened to make room for the system, but some existing lanes could be used by street cars. Street cars also were part of discussions of the proposed "north river" redevelopment.

"It would reduce the need to drive across town," Barrott said. "You could go from the Embassy (Theatre) to the north river (development). It would reduce the need for people to move their cars downtown for distances that are too far (to walk)."

A street-car system also could promote economic development. Businesses that depend on walk-in traffic tend to spring up near street-car stops, according to the report.

Kenosha, Wis., spent \$5.2 million installing its street-car system in 2000 as part of a downtown development effort. The



The downtown lunch trolley passes by the City-County Building in Fort Wayne. Consultants hired by the city envision a street-car system that, like the trolley, could transport residents and visitors to downtown attractions. (Photo by Andy Barrand)

city purchased refurbished street cars and built a 1.9-mile “starter system” that connects downtown Kenosha, its Chicago commuter rail station, a 70-acre redevelopment project on Lake Michigan and several local museums. The fare is 25 cents a ride.

Rails and power lines were installed along existing streets, and street cars share them with automobiles.

Len Brandrup, Kenosha director of transportation, said ridership is not spectacular — about 21 passengers per hour — but averages the same number of riders as the city bus service.

The system is not oriented to move people during rush hour to and from the commuter train station and was not designed to take people to and from work in town.

“Right now, it’s a distribution system for downtown,” Brandrup said. “If we can encourage people to use it instead of getting in cars and going three blocks up the street, it keeps us from making additional investments in parking.”

Development is beginning near street-car stops, Brandrup said, and tourists are coming to Kenosha just to use the system. He also said an expansion is being considered.

“It provides a sense of permanence that bus lines don’t,” he said. “Developers will write checks for permanent investments.”

Brandrup said an investment in street cars is more of a policy decision that involves development goals. “It’s just one of the tools in your bucket. You have to make land-use decisions and have to allow density also.”

Dan Carmody, president of Fort Wayne’s Downtown Improvement District, said city development strategies have to encourage higher-density housing, not single-family homes on large lots.

“You’ve got to have density to make transportation effective that is not cars,” he said. “We have to think about it as a system, not adding street cars.”

Carmody envisions a street-car system with two major lines: a north-south line connecting Glenbrook Square Mall and Jefferson Pointe; and an east-west line connecting Indiana Tech and the University of Saint Francis. Both would run through downtown.

David Gionet, general manager of Citilink bus service, said street cars have not been researched. He said development today is much different than when street cars were the primary mode of transportation, but developers tend to follow mass-transit systems.

“If we make such an investment, we will find the type of development that occurs in the community would be more in tune with the transit network, which is a good thing,” Gionet said. “The difficulty would be connecting up all the possible (destinations).”

In 2005, less than 1 percent of Fort Wayne workers said they commuted via public transportation, not including taxis. Even fewer said they walked to work.

More than 95 percent said they commuted to work by car. About 86 percent drove alone, according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2005 American Community Survey.

An attempt to expand public transportation likely would not reap benefits in the near term, Gionet said. But a well-placed street-car line could attract riders who would normally take a car.

“‘If you build it, they will come’ does happen to some extent, if they are planned well,” he said. “If you put it in the proper location and it is useful to people, you’ll get the ridership for sure.”