



Planning — August/September 2013

News

LA Streetcar Project Moves Forward

In the early 1900s, the City of Angels had a functioning streetcar system. By the 1920s it became the largest streetcar system in the world. By the 1960s, the streetcars were gone. You might think that's the end of the story. You would be wrong.

"In the last 10 years, the idea to bring the streetcar back became a viable plan," says Eric Metz, project director for Los Angeles Streetcar, Inc. Now that plan lacks only a federal funding commitment and a completed environmental review process to come to fruition.

In the last decade, downtown Los Angeles has experienced an extraordinary revitalization, thanks to a fourfold increase in residential population, urban neighborhood growth, major commercial development, and successful entertainment and cultural destinations.

The new streetcar project will connect downtown's major destinations with its historic districts. What's proposed is a four-mile loop that will run along Broadway, 11th, Figueroa, 7th (or 9th), Hill, and 1st streets through downtown.

Many of downtown's residential neighborhoods and commercial districts will have direct access to the streetcar, greatly enhancing pedestrian mobility throughout the area. The streetcar will also connect with downtown's major transit intersections, and provide direct access to the regional subway and light-rail network.



The environmental review process and federal grant application process are under way. A draft Environmental Impact Report should be completed this fall or winter, with ground breaking scheduled for 2014 and a completion date of 2016.

Construction is estimated to cost between \$110 and \$125 million. "To date, 50 percent of the capital costs have been funded,"

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Plan in a Box, an open-source web-publishing tool that allows planners to engage residents in planning initiatives, won a \$620,000 grant from the Knight Foundation's Knight News Challenge in June. Among the seven other winners were an open government project, Open Gov for the Rest of Us (\$350,000), and Civic Insight (\$220,000), a vacant properties database.

Like IBM (Smarter Cities) and Cisco (Smart+Connected Communities), Microsoft in July announced its "smart city" initiative called CityNext, aimed at bringing together the resources of the tech giant, local partners, city government, and residents "to connect and transform a variety of city functions."

The New Jersey Supreme Court ruled in July that Gov. Chris Christie overstepped his authority in abolishing the Council on Affordable Housing, which was created by the legislature in 1985.

In response to a year of extreme weather events, bipartisan legislation that supports local efforts to plan for natural disaster resilience was introduced in the U.S. House in June. The bill, the Strengthening the Resilience of our Nation on the Ground (STRONG) Act, was introduced in the U.S. Senate last December.

explains Metz. "Local funding is provided by a Community Facilities District, also known as a Mello-Roos District, which was approved by downtown voters in December 2012."

Los Angeles city council member José Huizar was a major champion of the streetcar project and led the city to back the private sector's investment with nearly \$300 million in public funds to finance the operation and maintenance of the system over the next three decades.

The last piece of the funding puzzle is a commitment of federal money to cover the remaining capital costs.

"We are confident that our project will score well in the federal process, especially as we are backing Washington's investment with over \$350 million of local funds," says Metz. "The high level of local private- and public-sector commitment should put us in a very strong position."

LA's streetcars will resemble those in Portland, Seattle, and cities around the world. "One of our primary goals is to provide a seamless curb-to-streetcar experience, so people with bikes, baby strollers, and wheelchairs can roll on, roll off with ease," explains Metz.

"The streetcar is designed to fit into any environment," he adds. "And in downtown, we are working hard to ensure that the streetcar works in both historic and contemporary neighborhoods."

Once the downtown streetcar goes into service, it is anticipated that other neighborhoods such as the Arts District, Chinatown, USC, and Long Beach will want their own streetcar systems as well.

— *Judith A. Stock*

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With temperatures exceeding 128 degrees, it's tempting to see whether it's hot enough to fry an egg on the sidewalk in Death Valley National Park. "Please don't," say rangers there, who are tired of cleaning up the egggy messes, noted an NBC story.

Shifting Parking Strategy Means Changing Attitudes

New York City is the latest place to try out a differential parking pricing strategy, based on the concepts espoused by Donald Shoup, FAICP, in his book *The High Cost of Free Parking*. The New York City Department of Transportation has implemented PARK Smart in three neighborhoods — Greenwich Village, the Upper East Side, and Park Slope, Brooklyn — and launched the program in Jackson Heights in Queens last spring. Another pilot, on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, starts this fall.

But, as other cities have discovered, getting community buy-in can be difficult if residents and business owners see the new parking pricing program as a rate increase. "We believe extensive community involvement and engagement are the best ways to overcome the public's concerns about pricing changes," says Tom Maguire, assistant commissioner of project development.

The NYC DOT is working closely with communities to design its PARK Smart programs. So far, it's learning some valuable lessons from its public outreach process:

Before proposing pricing changes as the solution, work with the community to define problems.

Throughout the Jackson Heights Neighborhood Transportation Study, which began in 2009, the DOT worked with community groups, business leaders, and elected officials to define how double-parking, congestion, and the lack of on-street parking — all interrelated issues — were impacting mobility. The community helped to articulate the problem and thus supported the solutions.

Create a holistic program that improves all aspects of curb management.

Pairing pricing changes with a comprehensive set of solutions has been especially important in neighborhood retail areas, which have little or no off-street parking. If solutions don't accommodate all users of the curb, problems of congestion and double parking will persist.

In Jackson Heights and on Atlantic Avenue, the program includes commercial paid parking (charging commercial trucks to park at the curb, which improves vehicle turnover) and early-morning free commercial delivery zones, as complements to the pricing changes for passenger vehicle parking.