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News

JANUARY 9, 2008

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Should Tulsa Take the Trolley?

It might seem romantic, it might even appear smart, but light rail doesn't fit Tulsa's needs. But a good jitney service might be a good idea . . .

BY MICHAEL D. BATES

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Mayor Kathy Taylor's blue-ribbon "Complete Our Streets" panel has made its report. Beyond its recommendations on how to finance street repairs and how to improve contracting practices to get street repairs done quicker at a lower cost, the task force included a third subcommittee to address "Smart Urban Design."

That surprised some people, but it made sense. The street network is there to move people and goods from one place to another, to get them where they need to go. We ought to consider streets in the context of other ways to move people around town, and we ought to see if there's some way to put where we are and where we need to go closer together.

The subcommittee's recommendations included "establish[ing] a dedicated source of funds, e.g. sales tax, for public transportation purposes to include planning, operations and maintenance to improve the system as well as initiating the necessary analyses for passenger rail implementation."

In other words, they want us to start planning to build a taxpayer-funded light rail system.

I should confess at this point that I am a fan of rail-based mass transit systems. I spent five years in the Boston area without a car, relying on my own two feet and the MBTA's subway

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and streetcar lines to get me around. I love visiting cities in the northeastern U.S. and Europe, where I can get around without having to navigate congested streets or figuring out where to park.

That said, a light rail system in Tulsa would be a colossal waste of money, just as it has been for most American cities that have built systems in recent years. The practical and economic advantages of rail-based transit vanished by about 1920. While rail still works in cities like Boston, New York and Chicago that were built around it, it doesn't make sense for a city that has had most of its growth during the reign of the automobile.

Once upon a time, Tulsa had a light rail system of sorts. In 1907, Tulsa Street Railways began running streetcars along Main Street and Fifth Street downtown. Two years later, Oklahoma Union Traction began operations. In 1912, Charles Page's Sand Springs Railway began interurban service between that growing town and Tulsa's Archer Street, serving industrial sites and new subdivisions along the Line. (All this is according to the 1980 book *When Oklahoma Took the Trolley* by Alison Chandler and Stephen D. Maguire.)

At its greatest extent, Tulsa's light rail system connected downtown with University of Tulsa campus, Swan Lake, the fairgrounds, Brady Heights, Riverview, Owen Park, and, via interurban, Sand Springs, West Tulsa, Red Fork, Sapulpa and Kiefer. Buses expanded the reach of the system even further.

But in 1935, the merged TSR and OUT lines went bankrupt, and in 1936, National City Lines bought the system and shut down the streetcars, extending the bus routes to incorporate the old streetcar lines.

The Sand Springs Railway continued to operate profitable passenger service, running cars every 10 minutes during rush hours, every 20 minutes the rest of the day, and hourly night owl service. Eventually the railway board concluded that the frequent passenger service was interfering with their even more profitable freight operations. January 2, 1955, saw the end of streetcar service in Tulsa.

When they were first introduced, few people owned automobiles. Cars on rails were a smooth alternative to wooden wheels bumping over brick streets or rutted dirt roads. Streetcars not only provided a more comfortable way to get around, they enabled development of the city beyond a compact core by providing a way for people to get to work from their new suburban homes.

Transportation defines the shape of a city, and, in older cities that did most of their growing up before the 20th century, the streetcar network set the pattern of development. Valuable street frontage along the line attracted retailers, where a shop would have the attention of the captive audience onboard the streetcar and where a passenger could easily drop in and buy a few things after disembarking at the stop nearest home.

Streetcar lines were also a natural place for higher-density residential development, where tenants could have a shorter walk in bad weather to catch the streetcar.

The streetcar's advantages started to ebb away shortly after World War I. Ingenious early motorists figured out they could make extra money by following the streetcar tracks and offering waiting passengers a ride. Instead of waiting for the next streetcar and paying a dime to board, you could jump into a jitney, pay a nickel and more quickly get to where you were going.

Cities, including Tulsa, moved to protect the interests of the streetcar companies, operating under city franchise, with their huge capital investments in tracks and equipment. Jitneys were forbidden from trolling streetcar and bus routes looking for fares. (Tulsa still has the law on the books: Tulsa Revised Ordinances Title 36, Section 133.)

Ending the jitney threat didn't save the streetcars. As automobiles became affordable for the general public, and streets improved in response to the demands of the growing number of motorists, the advantages of electric railways began to vanish. An automobile provided freedom and flexibility.

Newly enacted zoning laws required segregation of retail from offices from industry from residences, so that most every errand required traveling more than walking distance. Development and retail patterns in cities like Tulsa evolved based on the assumption that everyone had his or her own vehicle.

Take the Jitney

Let's imagine for a moment what car-free living would be like in the most optimistic scenario for Tulsa: Light rail tracks running down every arterial street, with streetcars coming by every 15 minutes. Now think about your typical weekday--going to work, shopping, running errands at lunch, taking your children to school and to after-school activities.

Think about the time you'd spend waiting for each trip and for transfers between lines. Think about how far you'd have to walk from where the streetcar drops you off on the street to the front door of your destination. Think about walking those distances, likely across a vast parking lot, carrying packages and herding a small child. Think about walking those distances in the cold, the rain, or the sweltering August heat.

In cities that were built for pedestrians being carried by streetcars and subways, you could make that mode of transportation work. In cities that were built for people in their own cars, you can't, but that hasn't stopped the expenditure of billions in federal, state, and local tax dollars to build new light rail systems.

The nearest one to Tulsa, and one of the newest, is in Little Rock. They've taken what seems like a sensible approach--connecting major business, tourist, and entertainment venues, all of which are in an area no bigger than that encompassed by Tulsa's Inner Dispersal Loop.

As of March 2007, after three years in business, the system carries an average of only 520 passengers each day, at a cost of \$4 per rider. When you add up capital and operating costs and divide by the number of riders over the history of the system, each trip has cost more than \$50.

So what about a bigger system designed to serve commuters? The capital and operating costs of the Los Angeles rail system are enough to buy each of its daily riders a hybrid car and to buy each of them a tank of gasoline every week.

Rather than spend millions to build a rail system that few Tulsans would use, there are a couple of things we could do to make it possible for more Tulsans to get around without a car.

First, let's do what we can to rebuild and reconnect the urban core of our city, to recreate an area where car-free living would be practical. The small zone that was developed before streetcars gave way to automobiles, roughly between Pine and 21st Street, Union and Harvard, has lost population to urban renewal, expansion of hospitals and universities, freeway construction, and the relentless expansion of downtown parking lots. An area that was home to more than 60,000 Tulsans in 1960 had less than half that population in 2000.

Implementing the city's Pearl District plan would be a good first step. Stormwater improvements would remove the Sixth Street corridor between downtown and TU from the flood plain. Putting the district under form-based development rules, as a replacement for zoning, would facilitate high-density, mixed-use redevelopment.

Step two is to improve public transit within that urban core, with more frequent service connecting residents with workplaces, shopping, entertainment, the Utica medical corridor, TCC, TU, and OSU-Tulsa, and downtown.

That doesn't necessarily mean spending more money on Tulsa Transit. It's funny, we know from history that free markets are superior to centrally planned economies, and yet we expect a centrally planned bus network to succeed. In many parts of the world, privately-owned vehicles provide public mobility. The free market is the most efficient way to allocate supply to meet demand.

Let's end the ban on jitneys. Someone with a van ought to be able to offer rides to his neighbors to take them to jobs, shopping, and doctors and to charge them a fare to cover his expenses and his time. Unlike a taxi, jitneys would allow a large number of passengers to share the cost of a trip.

A jitney owner might choose to run a regular route or might shift routes as demand shifts over the course of the day. Some jitneys might work on a "call-ahead" reservation basis. Where city bus trips usually require at least one transfer, smaller, more flexible jitneys could provide point-to-point service, making it more practical for people to do without a car.

Jitneys could not only serve this central district, but could provide convenient transportation to people who can't or would rather not drive, wherever they live.

While some rules would be needed, barriers to entry and regulation should be kept to a minimum. The city's role could be to help potential riders understand how to use jitneys and to encourage shopping centers and office parks to allow jitneys to drop off and pick up passengers.

Before we tie ourselves to the train tracks, let's give free markets and entrepreneurial energy a chance to meet Tulsa's public transportation needs.

COMMENTS

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William, tulsa

1/10/2008 - 1:20pm



I think it is a good idea to encourage density and decrease the length and number of trips each person makes. Especially in the core. However as traffic rises people often push for more lanes. This helps for a bit, but then the lanes fill up with traffic again. And on and on you go. If people become uncomfortable with the level of traffic we need to encourage mixed use, higher density growth. Bringing people and the places they want to go, closer together. Once a sufficient amount of density occurs then small bus/wheeled trolley systems can become more feasible.

Commuting from say BA to Downtown is an interesting issue. It may be that BA itself begins to grow its own jobs and density and thus the number of people commuting will not dramatically increase. A rail line between the two, may or may not be economically feasible. But I do believe if we were to ever consider widening the BA corridor to alleviate traffic, that cost should be included when we balance that against the cost of a rail line between the two cities. Light rail costs but cars and car infrastructure costs money as well. Not to mention the very act of widening streets inhibits density, walkability, biking, etc.

Regardless imo it would be wise to look to a future where both scenarios may be possible. For by encouraging mixed-use, high density nodes along a possible Tulsa- BA light rail line, it won't hurt either way, whether we eventually put in a light rail or not. Those mixed-use, higher density nodes will help decrease traffic, which is a good thing regardless. And, or, if it turns out a light rail is desirable in say 30 years, by planning now we will already have the station property and right of ways available and the dense nodes that will make it all the more workable. Same with a possible light rail or trolley line, between Jenks and downtown Tulsa.

The strategic encouragement of high-density nodes in certain areas where light rail can be more easily put in, if its ever needed or not, is a smart and safe move for an unpredictable future.

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dplumadore, Owasso

1/ 9/2008 - 9:00am



While a Jitney service is a quaint idea, the bigger picture should be addressed. The decline of the passenger rails in the fifties and sixties was not due to inconvenience of waiting on the train and the hassle of commuting by rail. The decline was due to automakers and oil companies selling "The American Dream" to consumers, making them believe that there should be not one,

but two cars in every American's garage. The result is pollution and depletion of our natural resources as well as sever conjestion on our streets and highways. An effective transit system using renewable energy sources is wiser than buying everyone in Tulsa County a hybrid and having the same conjestion issues. I personaly would rather have a thrity five minute train commute from Tulsa to Owasso in the evenings than the ninety minutes i spend parked on highway one sixty nine every evening.

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