

## Urbanite #60 June 09

By: Michael Anft



*Waiting for his ride: Attorney David Funk chairs the Charles Street Trolley Corporation, which is leading the battle to return streetcars to the streets of Baltimore.*

**When David Funk steps out** of his law office at 36 South Charles Street and looks south, he sees Inner Harbor tourists. If he turns around and shifts his gaze up Charles Street, he sees the asphalt rise. The crest is a natural barrier against exploring the city, he says: "People don't walk up that hill."

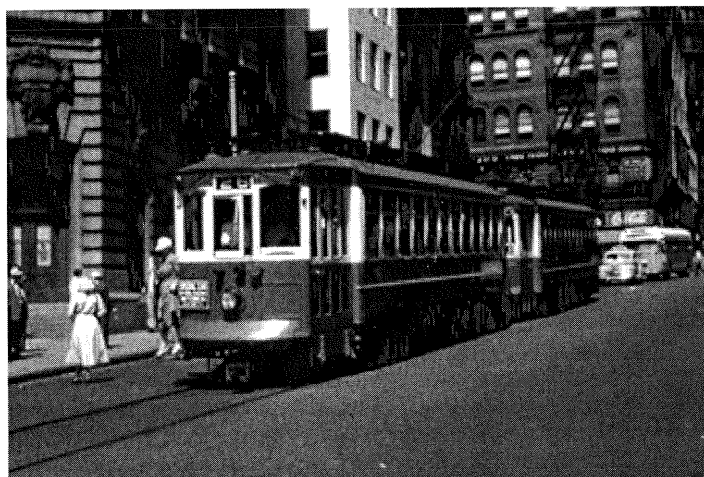
Several blocks north, in Mount Vernon, Henry Hagan sees parking lots, some decaying older buildings, and lots of traffic that needs "calming." The president of Monumental Life Insurance Company on Chase and Charles streets, he wants an economic engine that will pump up to \$1 billion of new investment into the Charles Street corridor. "We're at a disadvantage at trying to maintain our vibrancy here," Hagan says, citing new biotech and residential projects to the east and west.

And if you see Kristin Speaker, executive director of the Charles Street Development Corporation (CSDC)—the nonprofit group entrusted with enhancing prospects for the city's major north/south artery—on a corner a mile or so farther north in Charles Village (the CSDC's headquarters is actually back downtown in Charles Center, but bear with us), you'll hear how the neighborhood needs help eliminating vacant lots—some kind of innovation that will bring in the cash necessary to make the best use of the corridor's real estate.

The three of them, along with a dozen or more others from the ranks of developers, museum chiefs, neighborhood associations, restaurateurs, retailers, and universities, have decided that progress on Charles Street depends on rolling backwards in time. They want a 7-mile, fixed-rail streetcar loop running north from the Inner Harbor up Calvert to Redwood, turning on Charles to go up to Johns Hopkins University's Homewood campus. The line will return to the harbor via Maryland Avenue and the streets it becomes as you travel—Cathedral, Liberty, and Sharp—with a turnaround on Conway Street that sends the trolley back to the Inner Harbor visitors' center.

Streetcar advocates say that the trolleys will deliver residents, harbor tourists, shoppers, and carloads of cash to Baltimore's grand old boulevard as they roll along in the right-hand lanes of streets along the route. Kittelson & Associates, a consulting firm they hired to prepare an engineering report on the streetcar idea, predicts 2.5 million riders per year.

Like streetcar proponents in dozens of other cities that are either building or planning back-to-the-future trolley lines, Baltimore's heritage rail enthusiasts are following a trend set by Portland, Oregon, whose modern streetcar system—the first since the 1940s to use new vehicles—inspires wide-eyed reverence among transit fans. More than \$3 billion in investment has sprung up within a couple of blocks of Portland's trolley line since it opened in 2001, according to Portland Streetcar Inc., the nonprofit corporation that manages the city-owned system. Property values nearby have shot up, and ridership has remained strong and steady.



*The Past: A Baltimore Transit Company trolley on Charles Street in 1948. | photo by G.J. Voith*

A streetcar in Baltimore, backers say, can go one better. "Baltimore has something that Portland doesn't—cultural institutions that anchor the corridor," says Funk, a senior partner at Funk & Bolton and chair of Charles Street Trolley Corporation ([www.charlesstreet.org/trolley](http://www.charlesstreet.org/trolley)), the entity formed in September 2008 to continue the work of a group that has kicked the tires on the streetcar idea for the past five years. "But there are a lot of underdeveloped properties. If Charles Street is going to become a really vital area, it will need something to pull it together. We think a streetcar will do that."

His group's search for a way to return people to Charles

Street is also soaked in irony, he concedes. Urban centers had the life sucked out of them in the '50s and '60s, as the automobile—and the forces that promoted it—signaled the death of the streetcar. But the virtues of old-school electric rail remain as plentiful as cars stuck in downtown traffic: Studies have shown that fixed-rail cars draw 30 to 40 percent more riders than buses and much more related investment. They're also "quieter and less offensive than buses," Funk adds. The trolley would attract new high-density residential development, increase retail traffic, and encourage some of the city's 11 million visitors to take a ride uptown. "There's no great thought that the trolley will supplant cars," Funk says. "Our focus is on urban livability."

Nationally, this new generation of streetcar projects have proven to be useful in drawing in money and people, eliminating car trips for local residents, and knitting a community together, says Jim Graebner, chair of the streetcar subcommittee of the American Public Transportation Association, a trade group in Washington, D.C. "Plus, they're fun. People just get on them to enjoy the ride," he says. "There's no other type of public transportation like that."

When talking about the Charles Street streetcar, it's useful to spell out exactly what it isn't. The trolley isn't part of the MTA's Red Line, the ambitious mass transit project due to run 14 miles from Woodlawn to Hopkins-Bayview by 2016. Currently, City Hall and the Greater Baltimore Committee favor a plan for the Red Line dubbed Alternative 4C, which involves light-rail trains traveling underground through downtown, emerging in East and West Baltimore. Light rail systems such as the current Maryland Transit Administration's Light Rail are generally faster, bigger, and more intrusive than trolley lines: The long trains of light-rail cars can't share the road with traffic, as streetcars can. The MTA is supposed to decide what form the Red Line will take this summer.



*The Future: In a rendering, a modern streetcar negotiates Mount Vernon Place. | illustration by Newlands & Company*

The Charles Street streetcar is also not the "downtown circulator," the city's yet-unnamed free shuttle bus service that will run low-emissions hybrid buses along three downtown circuits, including one up Charles from the harbor to Penn Station, starting later this summer.

Is there room for all three projects? The city seems to think so, though the trolley, once built, would probably eliminate the shuttle service. "We see the shuttle as a test as to whether there's a market for the trolley—and not as a threat

to it," says Jamie Kendrick, deputy director of the city's transportation department. "For one thing, the trolley will serve a different clientele, one that might want to end up farther north than Penn Station, at Johns Hopkins or in Charles Village. For another, the trolley will be able to draw investment because of the permanency of the rails. That's key."

A trolley might fit in nicely with the city's various sustainability initiatives, supporters add. An electric streetcar line is a greener alternative to gas-powered cars and buses—though its small scale means that it wouldn't take a very big bite out of the city's carbon footprint.

Besides, the Trolley Corp. and the city have some green problems of their own. Specifically, getting enough of it. Consultants estimate that it would take \$160 million or so (in 2008 dollars) to construct the trolley—peanuts compared with the Red Line, likely to land well north of \$1 billion, but a hefty tab nonetheless. Almost all of that will come from taxpayers, with some help from tax-break financing from the city and, possibly, a levy on Charles Street businesses. The Trolley Corp. has so far raised \$50,000 in private donations, and the city has committed \$800,000 in planning funds, says Funk. But raising construction money is another chore entirely. "We definitely need to come up with a plan for capital costs," Funk says. "Every other issue we have is workable. We need to have a financial consultant come up with a plan."

Mayor Sheila Dixon opposes any localized tax that resembles the special benefits district fees residents in some neighborhoods pay; she also prefers not to meddle with the city's already meddlesome property tax rate. What's more, she wants to make sure that streetcar enthusiasts don't siphon off federal funds intended for the Red Line.

City officials don't blanch, however, when noting that city and state money might be used almost exclusively for the trolley project. The Trolley Corp. has already received conditional support for tax breaks and parking revenue from the city to pay operating costs. "Look, there's not a single public transportation system nationwide that is privately funded," Kendrick says. "You're going to need public money to make this work." The streetcar fits right in with the city's thinking, he adds: "We like to have one project in construction, another in engineering, and a third in planning. The streetcar is still in the planning phase."

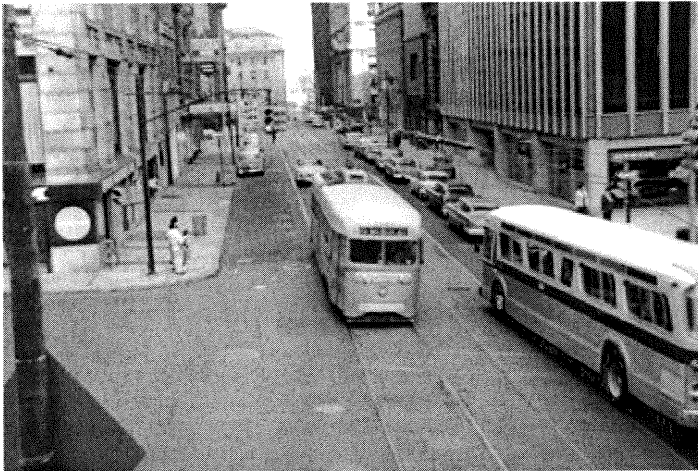
But the potential for massive taxpayer subsidies is already enough to stop some people from feeling the Trolley Corp.'s build-it-and-they-will-come enthusiasm. Is this public transportation or an economic development tool? If it's more the latter than the former, then why should the rank-and-file from across the state prop up some of the city's wealthier addresses?

"I see economic development along Charles Street as a good idea, but is this the right way to go about it?" says Ed Hopkins, a retired systems analyst for the Space Telescope Science Institute, board member of the Remington Neighborhood Alliance, and self-described gadfly. Hopkins came out against the project a couple years ago, when there was serious talk of taxing low-income people in his neighborhood, among others along the communities that edge Charles Street, to pay for it. He calls the streetcar "a gated trolley" and maintains a website—[www.trolleytrouble.org](http://www.trolleytrouble.org)—to lay out the case of the opposition.

"Baltimore really needs solid mass transit. That's where the money should go—not this Gucci streetcar line," Hopkins adds. "The idea that [the Trolley Corp.] has is that people will like a streetcar better than a bus, which is full of allegedly scary lowlifes. Projects like this should never be allowed to proceed."

Trolley backers aren't surprised by the dissent. "We know there are certain people who are dead set against this," Funk says. "They think there is some kind of conspiracy going on."

It's not the first time the C word has been coupled to the streetcar.



*End of the road: By the 1950s, electric rail use in American cities was in sharp decline as private cars and diesel buses sent the surviving trolleys to the scrap yard. This 1963 scene shows a streetcar sharing Fayette Street with other traffic. | courtesy of Enoch Pratt Free Library, Central Library/State Library Resource Center, Baltimore, Maryland*

The story goes that in the early 1920s General Motors President Alfred Sloan dictated a memo that would circulate among GM managers, Phillips Petroleum executives, Standard Oil big shots, glass and rubber companies, and bankers. Sloan had a \$65 million deficit staring him in the face and a country that was well served by rail lines. About 90 percent of Americans traveled daily by rail to get around cities: 15 billion trips a year. Only one in ten owned a car.

So Sloan and his confederates waged war on electric rail. Organized crime thugs shook down rail managers, purchased street railways, and sent the trolleys to the scrap yard. Bankers were paid off to persuade their rail clients to convert to buses and shift their lending practices accordingly. Politicians and transit company officials were given Cadillacs for playing along with the scheme. GM formed several transit companies, most notably National City Lines, that bought out existing transit lines and converted them to buses.

At least that's the story Bradford Snell, a former counsel to the U.S. Senate, still tells. A 1974 report Snell put together on GM's alleged anti-competitive practices figures prominently in the corporate biography of GM he plans to publish with Alfred A. Knopf within the next two years. Even

though a federal jury in 1949 returned a \$5,000 verdict against GM, Firestone Tire and Rubber, and other companies (and fined their executives \$1 each), GM has long denied any involvement. Perhaps more surprisingly, so have fans of Baltimore's old streetcars. Even though National City Lines made its presence known here, local streetcar historians say GM hardly killed the streetcar, at least not by itself.

Baltimore's streetcar business—Charles Street folks take note—was always a chancy one. In 1859, the city got its first horse-drawn rail line. It wasn't until 1885 that Leo Daft opened the country's first commercial electric railway line, which originated at 25th and Oak (now Howard) streets. But its electrified third rail was a safety menace, so the juice was turned off and the horses led back out of the stable.

In the 1890s, a brief but remarkable effort by the Baltimore Traction Company led to a cable car system driven by a huge network of steam-driven cables that moved at street level between the rails. A large wheel that spun at a building at Druid Hill Avenue and Retreat Street yanked the cars around at 6 miles per hour. Within a few short years, electric rail competitors—mostly notably the United Railways and Electric Company—forced it to convert to overhead wires.

By the turn of the century, electric rail car lines were combined and extended into one extensive system, fueling the development of new "streetcar suburbs" such as Roland Park. But not long after Henry Ford's first assembly line in 1908, internal combustion started competing with—and gaining on—electric rail. "Jitneys" and independent, gasoline-fueled buses ran ahead of trolleys, stealing riders. Cities began to plan for the Age of the Automobile: In the Baltimore of the 1930s, new bridges, like the Orleans Street viaduct or the span over Wilkens Avenue, were forbidden to carry rail traffic.

In 1933, United Railways filed for bankruptcy and reorganized to become the Baltimore Transit Company. During World War II, war rationing cut down on automobile use, and streetcars enjoyed a last hurrah. Baltimore Transit Co. ridership reached its zenith in 1943, when workers heading to war plants sardined their way into streetcars. "Streetcars boomed then, so the Transit Co. brought old cars out of mothballs," says Jerry Kelly, a 75-year-old streetcar aficionado who volunteers at the Baltimore Streetcar Museum.

This is the era that supplies most of the current streetcar nostalgia, but it was brief. National City Lines, the GM-backed conglomerate, bought majority shares of the Transit Co. in 1946, when the company was shedding riders as servicemen returned home looking to start new lives—preferably ones with cars and suburban homes. "No one wanted to live in the city anymore," Kelly says. "The buzzword around 1945 was 'free wheeling' instead of 'fixed wheeling.'"

As development pushed outward, the expense of extending rail lines was unjustifiable. In the 1950s, the city's traffic grid was reworked by hotshot engineer Henry Barnes to get people in and out of the city as quickly as possible. Barnes complained that the trolleys got in the way of his beloved parking meters. "I often said I didn't mind streetcars," he once declared, "except for the fact that they ran on the street."

By the time the last streetcar—the no. 8—limped up York Road for its final run in November 1963, no one was exactly shocked. “People still loved streetcars—even at the end,” Kelly says. “But you could see what was happening. We were losing the core of the city to cars.”



*Trolley revival: The modern streetcar line that opened in Portland, Oregon, in 2001 was the first in the country to use new, Czech-made vehicles such as this. | courtesy of Portland Streetcar Inc.*

Baltimore’s streetcar story lurched back to life in 1997, when Jimmy Rouse, son of mega-developer James Rouse and the owner of now-vanished Louie’s Bookstore Café in Mount Vernon, was serving as president of the Historic Charles Street Association. In the 1980s, Rouse had benefited from a rubber-wheel trolley-like bus that ran from the harbor up Charles, depositing tourists at the restaurant for lunch. But then-mayor Kurt L. Schmoke’s budget slashed the program’s tires, so to speak, hurting businesses.

“I started thinking that a streetcar might be a good way to get tourists up Charles Street,” Rouse recalls. “My goal has always been to return Charles Street to what it was when I was a kid.”

Years later, Henry Hagan, inspired by the Portland model, decided that a streetcar might rein in traffic on Charles Street better than making the street two-way, as was then being discussed. Streetcar partisans have since spent five years courting support from forty institutions and neighborhood groups. Funk says the project now has conditional support from Mount Vernon residents who worry about construction disruption and overhead wires. (Such fears kept the old streetcars off the cobbled streets for Mount Vernon; the original line diverted around the historic neighborhood.) The Baltimore Area Convention and Visitors Association, the Catholic Archdiocese of Baltimore, and Johns Hopkins University are on board as well.

With a pro-transit White House and a host of recession-fighting public works projects coming down the pike, Trolley Corp. partisans think they have momentum on their side. “We’ve got about a 70 percent chance of this happening within the next five years,” Hagan says. On April 29, Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Oregon) introduced a House bill to fund urban streetcar projects called the “Federal Streetcar Revitalization Act of 2009.” Baltimore wants a piece of that action. “If everything went perfectly and we quickly captured

federal money, we could get a shovel in the ground in two years,” Funk says. The line could start running within two years after that.

But is the Trolley Corp’s route the best place to build it? Gerald Neily, a former Baltimore traffic planner and a veteran of the design process for MTA Light Rail in the 1980s, suggests some tweaks. As proposed, the streetcar comes within blocks of the Light Rail on its parallel southbound journey back downtown. “Personally, I’d rather have it go all the way down on St. Paul Street, so you wouldn’t have to worry about redundancy,” says Neily, who writes about urban planning for the news site *Baltimore Brew* and on his own blog, Baltimore InnerSpace. (He also co-authored this issue’s transportation-themed “**Drawing Board**” proposal on page 49.) More ambitiously, Neily wants to run the streetcar into an underground transit terminal at Charles Center, where it could link up with the subway, Light Rail, and the Red Line. He also proposes a northeast extension of the line from Johns Hopkins down the wide, tree-lined median of 33rd Street and on up Loch Raven Boulevard to Morgan State University. Such a college-to-college connection would turn the line from a cute tourist-conveyor into a serious uptown transit option.

But Neily’s larger concern is that the Charles Street trolley would be unlikely to play well with existing MTA bus or light rail—because it’s not an MTA project. The Trolley Corp. is mulling various governance options for the line, which could be owned and run by the city, by a nonprofit corporation, or by a public/private streetcar authority that combines the two. But MTA authority isn’t being considered, and Neily says that’s a mistake: “You have to have oversight by one agency.

Somebody has to come along and say, ‘How do all these pieces come together?’”

“Connectivity” is the mantra of transit geeks, and it’s also the most obvious failing of Baltimore’s existing Metro and Light Rail systems, which notoriously graze each other without linking. Surface streetcars offer an opportunity to stitch the system back together—one that’s far cheaper than the light rail alternative for the Red Line. Smaller streetcars might placate Canton residents who object to the prospect of block-long light rail trains rumbling down Boston Street. Moreover, Neily says, burying Red Line riders in an expensive new tunnel blocks away from a parallel subway tunnel defies transit logic. “The whole purpose of transit is to make the city work,” he says. “This is totally at odds with that.” The city core, where attractions and destinations are tightly packed, should be served by fairly slow-paced vehicles that stop often—in a word, streetcars.

Still, mass-transit nonbelievers insist that just because streetcars are cheaper than subways doesn’t mean they’re not municipal money pits that died for a good reason. “They’re a scam,” says Randal O’Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian, subsidy-loathing Cato Institute, a think tank in Washington. “In Portland, my former hometown, they built a streetcar to spur investment after building a light rail system to spur investment. Really, none of it has worked.” He says taxpayer subsidies along the streetcar line amount to \$665 million—over and above what it cost to build and outfit the streetcar line. And he cites figures showing that, as a share, mass transit ridership overall in Portland has dropped since 1985, before light rail and streetcar lines were in operation. “They haven’t spurred development. All they’ve spurred is a




call for more subsidies to subsidize the subsidies," O'Toole says.

Even die-hard trolley fans admit that their beloved conveyances may have an uphill climb trying to win back hearts and minds. "Baltimore is so provincial that they don't care what's happened with streetcars in New Orleans or San Francisco," says Kevin Mueller, a Catholic priest in Gambrills and author of *The Best Way to Go: The History of the Baltimore Transit Company*. He's been a motorman at the Baltimore Streetcar Museum for the last thirty years. "This isn't a public transit town. That, and the fact that most Baltimoreans see public transportation as something poor people ride. There's still bigotry in this world. That's the battle [the Trolley Corp.] will have."

But Mueller says that if the Trolley Corp. does things right—makes cars that look good, run on time, and get people where they need to go, like they did a long time ago—he might become convinced.

"You'll always have people who'll complain. But if this changes some attitudes about public transportation in the long run, it might be worth it," he says. "Maybe this time, it'll be different."

—*Michael Anft is a senior writer at Johns Hopkins Magazine and a regular Urbanite contributor. John Ellsberry is an artist, photographer, writer, and IMAX projectionist at the Maryland Science Center. The two have collaborated regularly over the last twenty years.*

 On the air: More trolley talk on the Marc Steiner Show, WEAA 88.9 FM, on June 17.

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