



"STREETCARS ARE RETURNING" (1)

Although in many ways urban transit development in the USA has surged in a forward direction in spite of the current administration at Federal level pushing for bus rapid transit. Whether we are copying America or America copying us is a question not easily answered but without question well-run streetcar lines have attracted billions of dollars in stipulated investment, investment that would not have occurred without the streetcar. It should be noted that many of these investments have been voluntary with a public having voted to continue the transit tax.

In Britain it is on record that some suburban supermarkets have offered to partly finance a Supertram route that may pass close by. When the offer is not taken up it usually is because a Government grant or permission has been withheld. A good example of a political game of "Ping-Pong" comes from Leeds where a war of words for and against Supertram has failed to deliver a successful "knock-out-blow" in favour of Supertram. Many new streetcar lines in USA are actually being funded by local communities on their own. The popularity of this move comes from a background attitude of a public feeling which displays a dislike to using buses except when it is a feeder to a rail service.

Another factor not fully exploited is that although tram infrastructure costs exceed that of a bus, the running costs are a different matter. For the record, the overall cost of running a tram is lower than a bus, also it has the psychological advantage in that a tram route is a permanent fixture and not likely to disappear overnight.

Paul Weyrich is also on record for questioning the sort of symbolic relationship between the Bush administration and the manufacturers of buses and their component parts which he finds difficult to fully comprehend. He also pointed to Portland's (Oregon) light rail system and the way it intersected the eight mile modern and successful streetcar line, so successful in fact that the principal had attracted over 100 communities in the USA and even a few foreign countries thinking of bringing back streetcars. Many of the more spectacular light rail/streetcar developments were recently published in LRT NEWS, a small booklet printed by the TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH BOARD (2) and gave much detail about Portland's Metropolitan Area Express (MAX) and made the point that 70% of its patrons were choice riders, having either a car or having chosen not to own one. Portland's streetcar system keeps on growing from its initial 3.9-km (2.4 miles) and continues to thrive with a 2007 weekday ridership of 10,000. All its funds have come from non Federal sources except for a few housing development grants.

Other news items covered in LRT NEWS were the opening of a 30-km line in Seattle, the Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS) opened its first LRT line during 2007, a referendum to continue with the Transit Tax was given a 70% yes vote and the news that Toronto is to replace its current streetcars and provide a regional LRT network comprising 18 lines making it the largest in North America.

Despite the negative British attitude towards light rail and Supertram systems since 2005, the Americans have demonstrated that a public attitude was generally favourable towards more streetcars which helps to explain the private citizens attitude towards the tramcar. Our Government appears to have created an almost "watertight" diversion that those supporting Supertram will have difficulty in overcoming. An international opinion on urban transit recognises the valuable effect that the humble tram in light rail form has on reducing traffic congestion. Leeds, quoted above, appears to have been treated very badly and literally starved of transit funding. North America may hold at least one solution, start in a small way and keep adding to it. If successful here it is possible that business interests could take an interest and help financially.

REFERENCES

- 1) Paul M Weyrich - Chairman of the Free Congress Foundation - Virginia USA - June 3rd 2008).
- 2) LRT NEWS - Transportation Research Board - Vol.20 No 1 - Washington DC - April 2005)..

Prepared by F A Andrews LRTA Assistant Publicity Officer

For LRTA Membership details contact:

LRTA Subscriptions,
38 Wolseley Road,
SALE M33 7AU

Email: membership@lrta.org

For more details about Light Rail please contact

LRTA Development Officer,
7 Crofton Avenue,
Horfield,
Bristol BS7 0BP

Email: development@lrta.org

Visit our Website www.lrta.org