



The Center for Transit-Oriented Development

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*-Shelley Poticha, CEO
Reconnecting America*

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BOOK CHRONICLES RENEWED POPULARITY OF STREETCARS ACROSS U.S.

STREETCARS SHOWN TO ATTRACT MAJOR PRIVATE INVESTMENT

Gloria Ohland

December 12th, 2006

OAKLAND – Cities across the U.S. are returning to an “old” technology – streetcars – to service all the new higher-density condo, live-work, and loft development occurring in their downtowns, according to a new book by the national nonprofit organization Reconnecting America. Nearly 70 cities – from Tucson to Miami -- are either building, planning or actively investigating streetcar systems, according to a new book entitled *Street Smart: Streetcars and Cities in the Twenty-First Century*.

Streetcar systems are relatively inexpensive, typically costing just a third the per-mile cost of light rail, write Gloria Ohland and Shelley Poticha, the book’s editors and co-authors. Streetcars are also much easier and quicker to construct than light rail, and cause less disruption to neighborhoods. But the real reason streetcars are garnering so much national attention, they say, is because streetcars have been shown to correspond to significant private investment along their alignments. A chart in the book compares the initial public investments in several streetcar systems to the resulting private investment in development, and shows the “return on the investment” to equal 1,000 percent to 7,500 percent.

“Almost every American city had an extensive streetcar system at the turn of the last century,” says Reconnecting America CEO Shelley Poticha. “And streetcars are uniquely suited right now to promote the walkable, sustainable, high-intensity development that is proving so popular with young people and empty-nesters. Streetcars are really all about the pedestrian, and are often called ‘pedestrian accelerators’ and even ‘pedestrian slingshots.’”

The Portland Streetcar, one of several case studies in the book, has attracted \$2.3 billion in investment in 100 higher-density residential and mixed-use projects within a block of the alignment, and ridership has been triple the initial projections. The City of Portland has used development agreements with major property owners to leverage significant public benefits including affordability – almost a third of the new housing is affordable – and high-quality public plazas and parks. A study of the streetcar’s transportation and land use impacts, which is included in the book, shows that development built along the streetcar produces far fewer car trips than typical suburban development because buildings have little parking and residents use transit. This development also consumes

much less land.

Poticha says the popularity of higher-density housing near transit illustrates how the housing market is changing. She adds, “The high cost of providing parking – which can range upwards of \$40,000 per space in a parking structure -- drives development today, and streetcars make it possible for developers to provide less parking and put their money into high-quality design and building materials instead.”

Streetcar systems in San Francisco, Little Rock, and in Kenosha, Wisconsin, have also proven popular with developers, investors and riders, according to the book. The 2-mile system in Kenosha was constructed 6 years ago for just \$5.2 million, including the cars, and has prompted the “regeneration” of a brownfield with multi-family housing. Ridership on the F-Line in San Francisco exceeds 20,000 riders a day -- more riders than on the entire Santa Clara Valley light-rail system and only 8,000 fewer than the entire Caltrain Peninsula line, a commuter rail system stretching from San Francisco to Gilroy. The Little Rock streetcar has proven so popular it is being extended to the Clinton Library.

In response to the enormous demand for more transit, including lower-cost projects like streetcars, Congress established a new federal funding program last year called “Small Starts.” However, streetcars have proven so popular with the business community and with developers and property owners that they have often been built as public-private partnerships with local funding sources including tax increment financing, parking fees and assessment districts.

“This may be the streetcar’s greatest gift to 21st-century urban transportation: the effective confluence of local needs, local funding, and local determination,” writes Congressman Earl Blumenauer of Portland, a key advocate for streetcars in Congress. “Certainly there’s a role for the federal government to play. But many communities are seizing this opportunity to create transportation solutions that meet their individual needs without federal funding.”

The book includes chapters on issues ranging from the history of streetcars as public/private partnerships to planning for intense and pedestrian-friendly development. There’s compendium of federal and local funding sources and strategies, and case studies of the most robust systems. The book was published in partnership with the American Public Transportation Association and the national Community Streetcar Coalition.

*Reconnecting America is a national nonprofit organization that partners with the public and private sectors to promote best practices in transit-oriented development and development-oriented transit. Ohland and Poticha co-wrote and co-edited *The New Transit Town: A Best Practices Manual on Transit-Oriented Development*, published by Island Press in 2004. *Street Smart* is available at www.reconnectingamerica.org and at www.powells.com.*

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