

Mount Vernon Belvedere Clarion

July 2008

Volume 23, Number 07

The next general meeting will take place at the Belvedere Hotel, Tuesday, July 15, 2008, beginning promptly at 7:30pm. Both members and non-members are welcome to attend.

The Proposed Charles Street Trolley

At this month's general membership meeting, there will be a more formal discussion regarding the merits of the proposed trolley car system to run up Charles Street. Representatives from the Charles Street Development Corporation, who is leading the trolley car effort, as well as opposing individuals and groups will be present at the meeting present their views. This very important topic needs significant feedback from members of the Mt. Vernon community, so MVBA encourages as many members and non-members alike to attend the meeting.

Please go online at www.mvba.org to complete a 10-question survey to help guide our discussions as we move forward on this important decision. Survey ends Tuesday, July 15, 5pm.

Summary:

The proposed trolley will be a fixed-rail electric system with a single overhead wire and will run every 10 minutes at peak with a 1.5 to 3 million rider-ship paying MTA-type fares. The route will run mixed with traffic from the Inner Harbor, straight up Charles to Johns Hopkins University, back down Saint Paul to Mount Royal, then over to Maryland/Cathedral and then to Conway to return to the Inner Harbor. Construction cost is estimated to be \$156 million and funding by city, state and federal money. Annual operating costs estimated at \$4.5 million are planned to be paid by fares (\$1.8M), a city contribution (\$1.5M largely from discontinuing the free circulator bus), non-profit contributions (\$0.3M), advertising (\$0.5M), new tax on commercial properties and apartments (\$0.4M). The primary benefit stated for the trolley is "Promoting sustained and consistent economic development along the Charles Street corridor." Other proposed benefits include improving Hopkins to Harbor transit for locals and tourists.

The Charles Street Trolley, Charles Street Development Corporation

Since 2004, Charles Street Development Corporation ("CSDC") has studied the feasibility of a fixed-rail trolley in the Charles Street corridor that would connect the Inner Harbor with University Parkway. The trolley would travel north on Charles Street from the Convention Center and south on St. Paul Street from University Parkway, before crossing over at Mt. Royal Avenue and heading down Maryland, Cathedral, and Liberty Streets. Because the trolley would run with mixed traffic, it would not eliminate a travel



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lane, but would require the removal of 2-to-3 street parking spaces at each stop.

A trolley line would not only serve to improve north-south transportation in the City for residents, students, and visitors from out of town, but would also connect the corridor's many cultural and educational institutions, provide an increased pedestrian presence and decrease the need for parking, benefit the environment, raise property values and encourage infill development in areas that are targeted for change, and improve overall quality of life.

Connectivity - The proposed trolley route would connect many of Baltimore's neighborhoods and most prominent religious, historic, athletic, educational, and cultural destinations, including Johns Hopkins University, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Station North Arts and Entertainment District, University of Baltimore, Maryland Institute College of Art, the Washington Monument and Mount Vernon Place, the Walters Art Museum, the Peabody Institute, the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Camden Yards, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, the Lyric Opera House, the Basilica of the Assumption, and Old St. Paul's, as well as providing a link to already existing forms of mass-transit, such as the Light Rail, the Metro, Amtrak, and the Marc train.

Increased Pedestrian Presence - The calming effect the rail system would have on the currently dense flow of traffic moving through the corridor would further enhance livability by allowing residents and visitors to leave their cars behind when navigating the north-south axis of the city.

Tourism - While over 11 million people visit Baltimore's Inner Harbor each year, many do not experience all that the City has to offer. The long incline of Charles Street going north from the Harbor dissuades visitors from exploring the corridor. Charles Street is rich with historic destinations like the Washington Monument and Mount Vernon Place, as well as museums, galleries, restaurants and entertainment venues that are ripe for tourism, if only they were better connected to the Inner Harbor by a convenient, reliable and enjoyable means of public transportation. A trolley is the ideal choice for this type of transit because of its predictable route, measured pace, and the romantic image associated with trolleys as a historic means of travel. Because of these qualities, the Charles Street Trolley - like the cable cars in San Francisco - would become a tourist attraction itself, all the while connecting the many destinations along the route, and providing nostalgic visitors and residents with an exciting link to Baltimore's past when the streetcar was king.

Economic Development - Importantly, the per-

manence of fixed rail helps mitigate the risk for developers, allowing lower parking requirements, thereby making development projects more viable. Redevelopment not only increases economic development in already stable neighborhoods, but dramatically improves neighborhoods that have been neglected or targeted for change. In Portland, for instance, over \$2.28 billion has been invested within two blocks of the trolley's alignment, and since 1997, 55% of central business development has occurred within one block of the route. More residents along the corridor will also add synergy to neighborhood retail districts on Charles Street, Read Street, around Lexington Market and the Westside.

Environmental Benefits - Shifting travel from automobiles to transit has significant environmental benefits, as does the attraction of residents from suburban, automobile-oriented locations to a more urban, transit-supported corridor. Since it would be powered directly by electricity, a trolley would not produce the exhaust that cars, trucks, and busses do, leaving a far smaller carbon footprint on the City and reducing the pollutants to which residents are exposed.

Community Identity - Streetcars serve to create or enhance a positive image of the neighborhoods that surround them. As we have seen in places like Portland, Seattle, and Dallas, neighborhoods with trolleys develop a lively streetlife and booming businesses, becoming destinations for people from all over the area. Residents take pride in their trolleys and the trolleys become identifying features for the neighborhoods they serve. A high-quality trolley system is something in which a whole city can take pride, and provides physical evidence of a strong political and business commitment to overall economic health and vitality.

A Growing Trend - Since 2001, when Portland launched its Central City Streetcar project, many North American cities have begun to take notice of the transit and development potential of the modern streetcar. A number of similar systems have been completed in that time including Tampa, Little Rock, Tacoma, Charlotte, and most recently, Seattle. All have seen dramatic economic growth and general redevelopment. As of spring 2008, at least forty-six cities in Canada and the United States, including major cities such as Atlanta, Miami, and Columbus, Ohio have embarked on streetcar planning initiatives. This trend in modern urban transit is growing and America's cities are growing as a result.

Trolley Trouble Group

This entity can raise your real property taxes. It can, if you are stretched, push your taxes to a point

where you could lose your property *Ed Hopkins, for the Trolley Trouble group*

Beware the huge and birdless silence

*Only one ship is Seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break.*

“Next, Please”, Philip Larken

The Charles Street Trolley presents a pleasant image of modern street cars running up Charles Street and swinging by the Washington Monument. For most of the residents of Mt. Vernon their view of the trolley is captured in the video prepared under the auspices of the Charles Street Development Corporation. Go to www.youtube.com and search for “Charles St. Trolley - Modern Vehicle” Watch the video, enjoy the music. Dream.

(I don’t know if the trolley cars are the correct scale. The size of the trolley has not yet been specified. Also I was impressed by the lack of traffic.)But there is a great birdless silence dragging behind the trolley project and it is because of this almost invisible accompaniment that all the property owners of Mt. Vernon should look at the CSDC’s trolley with a critical eye.

The operating costs of the trolley will be financed by a new political entity. This entity will have the power to place a surtax on your property tax. This entity is referred to as a “special taxing district” or a “special assessments district.” I will refer to this political entity as the Trolley Taxing District. This is the huge and birdless silence following in the wake of the cute trolley running in the corridor. This entity can raise your real property taxes. It can, if you are stretched, push your taxes to a point where you could lose your property.

The Charles Street Trolley is not like the Downtown Circulator or the Red line or the future Yellow line. None of those projects are connected to new political entities that have the power to tax you. Worse yet, the only guaranteed source of income for the operating expenses of the trolley is its taxing authority over real property owners. Non-profits will voluntarily contribute to the trolley. They will not be legally bound. Baltimore City is scheduled to contribute to the operating expenses of the trolley. I do not think that the city can be legally obligated to this. It is possible that the fare-box could pay a substantial part of the operating expenses but it is also possible that the Trolley Taxing district, which will also manage the trolley, will decide to make the trolley free. Where, then, will the additional funds for operating the trolley come from?

Mt. Vernon real property owners must look long and hard at the Charles Street Trolley. Up to this point, as far as I can tell, your only source of information on the project has been the CSDC: the group selling the project to you. If you were buying a new “low gas mileage, green car” would you base your decision to buy that car solely on claims made by the dealer? (I have heard advertisements for the Hummer as a “green” car.) In the case of the Trolley don’t take the dealer—the CSDC—as your only source of information. You are not doing something as small as buying a new car: you are setting up a political entity which will tax you.

Our website, www.Trolleytrouble.org has “The Guide for the Critical Consumer.” This will get you started on evaluating the Trolley project for yourself. It gives you a check list for the legislation which will set up the Trolley Taxing district. It also makes a start at examining the Trolley project from a start up business point of view. Is this medium sized business that you are going to be supporting with your tax funds set up well from a business point of view?

Download this guide, print it out and take it to meetings.

Ed Hopkins, for the Trolley Trouble group

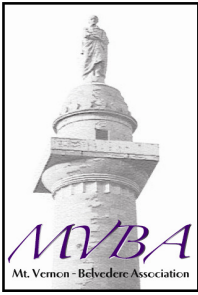
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Historic Mt. Vernon/Belvedere

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This month's focus at the general meeting will be a discussion of the pros and cons of the proposed trolley car system.

