A STREETCAR NAMED...
FIRST LET'S GET A TRAM, AND THEN WE CAN DECIDE WHAT TO CALL IT. | BY DARA MOSKOWITZ GRUMDAHL


If we play our cards right, though, Minneapolis will join those cities in having access to a swift, cheap, eco-friendly form of public transit called, well, we're not sure. In Europe they're called trams. In the United States they are known as streetcars or trolley cars or trolleys or turf-track trolleys.

Whatever they're called, you'd recognize one if you saw it: a train-like vehicle, moving on a low-lying track and ferrying people at swift (but not super-fast) speeds. Grass grows right up to these "turf tracks," and they are a core feature of Soren Jensen's vision for a bike-friendly, prosperous, smartly developed central Minneapolis.

Jensen is executive director of the Midtown Greenway Coalition. In his mind, turf tracks would thread along the south edge of the Midtown Greenway, the bike path that transverses the heart of Minneapolis, connecting the Greenway to the existing light rail. A tram? In the Greenway? Why, yes. For starters, that's what the Greenway is actually for: The abandoned railroad bed is owned by the Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority, which purchased it in 1980 with an eye toward putting one sort of train or another in it.

In the meantime, the bike path was born and became a remarkable city success story. While the rest of Minnesota suffered a construction bust during the Great Recession, condos and new building continued apace along the Greenway, and five large new construction projects representing some 1,200 living units are in progress along the Greenway now. Turns out people really, really like the Greenway for biking, skating, walking, stroller pushing, and general recreation. And developers and city officials really, really like creating virtual "beachfront real estate" out of the bowels of the old city. Adding a tram would lure that development magic east and unite traditionally impoverished communities with jobs from St. Paul, Bloomington, and Eden Prairie.

"I commute by bike every day," Jensen explains one overcast afternoon at a conference table just feet from the Greenway. "I love the Greenway. It's peaceful; it's beautiful. Sometimes people see hawks, I'm told. I have a different perspective on it. I'm the one who sees the national visitors—the international visitors—who come and say, 'This is so cool. How can we get one of these in our city?' From a safety perspective, it's fantastic—amazing. You don't have to cross any streets. It's actually faster to bike across town in rush hour than it is to drive, and in winter it's even faster; it gets plowed right away, faster than side streets most of the time—there are no stuck or stalled cars in the way."

The question, Jensen explains, is how to preserve the greenness and the quiet and add to it. Trams are the answer for a few reasons. One, big LRT trains would require far greater infrastructure and would require essentially turning the Greenway into an ugly concrete canyon. Two, trams spur economic development in a way that buses never do. Three, people intuitively like all kinds of trains, including trams, because you can tell which way they're going and you can count on the route never changing. And if you wonder how a tram would do in deep snows, Jensen explains that trams come with a small truck that plows snow off the track, and that trams operating in other snowy places such as Oslo, Switzerland, and Prague have no problems. All this makes a case for trams being key to raising the quality of life in the center city, fast.

But can we really have a tram? This is a question we all get to decide right now. Metro Transit is collecting community input for its Midtown Corridor Alternatives Analysis through fall 2013. The two most likely alternatives are the Greenway tram or a "rapid bus" along Lake Street (it's rapid because you pay before you get on). The rapid bus is probably cheaper, but detailed cost projections for the tram will only be done if the idea is recommended. And with no room on Lake Street for more lanes, it's unclear how rapid the bus would actually be. Whichever project is designated the "locally preferred alternative" will probably happen.

"Hennepin County purchased this corridor for rail 20-odd years ago," notes Jensen. "I'm hopeful that once and for all this year we can decide whether a streetcar is coming. But until we decide, the community can't decide a whole lot of other things." For instance, no links for Greenway-adjacent projects are being considered and the whole south side of the Greenway has no development, no stairs, no ramps, no nothing.

But if you and your neighbors like the idea of a tram, then ramps and elevators might be built to connect tram and street traffic. If that happens, you could take visitors from Prague, New Orleans, and yes, Kenosha to our new Greenway tram and tell them: "Sure, you have your trams, but in Minneapolis this is how we do it."