A Different Track
Think of it more as a 'circulator' than a 'streetcar,' and picture it running north–south

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Remember those maps? You know, those circa 2008-2010 blueprints that showed a possible streetcar running east to west through Boise’s downtown core?

Forget about them. Wipe them clean from your memory.

Remember the hubbub that swirled around the concept, which first came to public attention in Mayor Dave Bieter’s 2008 State of the City address (BW News, “Training Wheels,” Aug. 13, 2008), when he said, “If we can do it in 1908, surely we can do it in 2008.”

Forget that. Pretend it never happened.

The city of Boise and the Capital City Development Corporation, with a lot of help from the URS Corporation, which knows a thing or two about streetcars (it served as the engineer of record for in-operation lines in Portland, Ore., and Seattle and under-construction projects in Atlanta, Ga., and Tucson, Ariz.), are about to take a different track in getting Boise back on the rails in its discussion about a fixed-rail system.

And it begins with asking a different question. Instead of: “Would you support a downtown streetcar system?” the question will more likely become: “Would you support a north–south circulator?”
"It's interesting, if you ask whether you support a streetcar project without saying anything more, you'll get a neutral or, maybe, a nonsupportive stance," said Boise City Councilwoman Elaine Clegg. "But if you ask, 'What if it went from the west side of downtown to Boise State, and then eventually up to the Depot, they say, 'Of course; that would be great.'"

And the key, Clegg added, to a fresh look at a new Boise streetcar—the original electric streetcars ran through the city from 1891–1928—is more input from its citizenry.

"I'm going to encourage that we do much more deep, public outreach than simply say, 'Here, we think this is a great idea. What do you think?'" she said. "We had some public outreach last time, but not in a way that was widely publicized. The people who didn't participate didn't seem to know anything about it. I'm hoping that the media will be a bit more helpful this time in making sure that there's a public understanding and that citizens have the opportunity to participate."

And that's why URS is stepping in.

"They have a great deal of experience with this," said Neal Oldemeyer, director of the city's Public Works Department. "They came out on top, and we're looking forward to working with them."

The city recently awarded URS (which beat out HDR Engineering and CH2M Hill) a $437,500 contract—$375,000 in federal funds and an additional $125,000 split between the city and CCDC—to conduct what is technically known as an Alternative Analysis.

Of particular note is that nowhere in the recently inked professional services contract does the word "streetcar" appear. In fact, the project is called a 'downtown circulator.' Simply put, city officials don't want the general public to picture an antique streetcar dashing through the downtown. Instead, they want the public to envision a functional loop circulating people through the inner city to the university district, to the Boise Bench and, perhaps sooner than later, the Boise Airport.

"Don't go into this with a closed mind, thinking, 'Oh, they just want to run this toy train downtown.' That's absolutely not what this was ever about," said Clegg. "This is about creating a last-mile connection from a regional transit system into downtown Boise that people can get into downtown without bringing their car; and once they get downtown, they can get to their destination more easily."

Clegg didn't hesitate a moment when asked about the possibility of a route running to, and beyond, Boise State University.

"Absolutely. I would like to see, best case scenario, this to run past the Depot up to the airport, and onto the Bench," she said.

Equally important would be the circulator's proximity to a planned multi-modal center. The Gardner Company recently closed a $43 million deal to buy the landmark U.S. Bank Plaza—at Capitol Boulevard and Main Street—with hopes of putting a $12 million multi-modal transit hub at its base.

"You would definitely want them to coordinate," said Clegg. "My experience is that within a block or two would serve it very well."

And what with the Ada County Highway District's Downtown Boise Implementation Plan including a major redesign of the inner core—converting Third, Fourth, 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th, Jefferson and part of Eighth streets from existing one-way streets to two-way operations (BW, News, "One More Two-Way," Aug. 28, 2013)—Assistant City Engineer James Pardy thinks the timing for URS's analysis couldn't be better.

"The timing is almost perfect," said Pardy. "The multi-modal center conversation and ACHD plan are all examples that can help leverage decisions for a possible circulator."

Pardy should know. He's been tasked with being the city's point person in working with the URS team for the next 18 months.

"If you think of it, it's engineering 101," said Pardy. "We have the knowns. We reveal the unknowns. We get more information, weighing them all against possible solutions. We'll have several parallel tracks running at once: the technical side of it, as well as all of the public outreach."

Oldemeyer, Pardy's boss at Public Works, said his department is always looking at something that he called "the triple bottom line."

"You're looking at the economics. Then you look at it from an environmental perspective and, at the same time, a social perspective," he said.

Oldemeyer insisted that the city had its marching orders in solving transportation issues.

"Our citizen surveys say that transportation is the No. 1 issue," he said. "And there are three pieces to that: How do you successfully get people into Boise from the west side of the Valley? Then, how do you get them around the downtown core? And that's where a downtown circulator comes into play. And thirdly, how do you move people outside of the downtown core, and that's the bus system."

The analysis project, conducted by a full team from URS led by Senior Project Manager John Cullerton, is expected to kick off in early September and run through the end of 2014.

"The alternatives analysis is the piece we were missing when we discussed this issue back in 2008," Bieter told Boise Weekly. "I look forward to seeing the results of the study so we can begin to take real action toward building the comprehensive transportation system our residents deserve."

The analysis will require a steering committee with representatives from CCDC, the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho (better known as COMPASS), Valley Regional Transit, Boise State University and members of the Boise City Council.

Council President Maryanne Jordan told BW that a downtown circulator would be "an important first step in the maturation" of the community's public transportation system.

"It will allow future connections for alternative forms of transportation, and give people a convenient way to circulate in and around downtown without having to drive," she said. "I look forward to the results of this analysis."

Councilman David Eberle has been a passionate advocate for a downtown circulator since the earliest conversations surrounding the idea. He said "all great cities have great transit systems," and the project was long overdue.

"Now is the time to lay that foundation for Boise," said Eberle. "I believe Boise is destined to become a great city, and this study is one element of the process."

TJ Thomson, first elected to the Boise City Council in November 2009, at the height of the last debate over the possibility of a streetcar project, told BW that the community has to have more long-term transportation solutions.

"A circulator is important for relieving congestion and sparking economic growth in the downtown core," he said. "It also serves as an important first step in the creation of a rail or rapid–bus system, reaching out to more rural surrounding communities."

And that, Clegg added, is crucial, again saying that a downtown circulator would become "that last mile."

www.boiseweekly.com/boise/a-different-track/Content?oid=2980134&mode=print
"If we get a regional system that could then cut into the existing rail lines that come into the Depot, that would be vital," she said. "I think it's much more likely that people will ride if they know a streetcar is waiting for them. Study after study has shown that. Regardless, something has to connect from the Depot to downtown. Whatever the circulator turns out to be, it needs to go there. The questions are: Does it go downtown first? Or does it go downtown last?"

Boise's newest council member, Ben Quintana, who is up for re-election this November along with Jordan and Thomson, said Boise's high-profile construction projects point to the city's need to move people more efficiently.

"I see a downtown circulator as part of a comprehensive transportation system that complements car and bus service, improves bicycle friendliness and enhances walkability," said Quintana. "Ideally, a downtown circulator would connect the airport, Boise Depot, Boise State, downtown and the 30th Street area."


"A streetcar is part of that vision. Imagine people connecting to Boise State for games, to our downtown shops and Saturday market, and even—down the road—to our spectacular river park," said McLean. "I believe a downtown streetcar—if the experts say it could work—would be a good investment in Boise's future."

And while nobody is floating any maps of what a downtown circulator route might look like, the public can definitely start thinking north-south and forget that east-west thing, at least for now.

"What we learned is that maybe we need to be looking more at a north-south route that would take us to Boise State and beyond, possibly, to the Depot and maybe out a bit further, maybe to the airport," said Oldemeyer. "That's not to say that, at some point in time, the east-west doesn't come into play. There is a longer vision. Granted, we're focused on the downtown circulator, but you can't look at that in isolation."

Why does a circulator need to be a streetcar with a fixed track? It seems a circulator bus system would work far better. It would use existing infrastructure (the road) and it would be much more flexible (use a different road or serve a different area). Sure, it's not sexy like a streetcar would be, but it would make a lot more sense economically. Countless other "great cities" have put in fixed rail systems and it has ended up costing them a lot (usually at the expense of the bus system which serves the lower income earners). Adequately, fund a good bus system and we won't need a fixed rail streetcar circulator. Sure a bus doesn't look flashy for the politicians to use as a selling point, but the public is the one that ends up paying for it.

I was a member of the CCDC CAC that worked on the circulator plan. The reason why they wanted fixed rails in the street as opposed to a rubber tire option was that a business community needed to know that once in the ground, there would be no changing the routes, and therefore, killing that ever-so-precious traffic that once ran in front of your store. Confidence in rider traffic is a big factor in these systems. The problem came in that the business community liked the idea, but got squeamish on the overall tax/benefit ratio. Yes, other downtowns have realized positive results, but Boise is not like them and it's really easy to scare off the natives unless you can really show that this will work for them. There were a lot of public trans haters making a lot of noise at the time, too. They'll be back, you can bet on it.

The other reason that rail vs rubber is sought after is that a rail model is much sexier than a "bus" style. It doesn't have to be that way, however. There are BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) systems that can demonstrate the look and feel of a rail system. They are much cheaper and you can solve the route commitment issue by selling its flexibility and a modifying tax that moves with the route. If the route fails too far away from your front door, you pay less and visa-versa. Funding has always been a major sticking point here. The Idaho leg is totally deaf to this issue and there are too many haters to fight. You have to have a local option tax to spread the costs to, because you just can't hit the route sitters for all of it.

Re the comments made about the connectivity ideas from the article....all true. We discussed at length the possibilities on where the circulator would eventually go. The first phase of the project would have led to 'wings' that extend the circulator to the BSU area on the east to the Boise River/30th St upgrade to the west. And then a North/South concept overlaid on that. All of this would improve public transportation options for Boise and it gives theVRT bus system good anchor points to rely on for upgrades, as well.

None of this is cheap, but $4.00/gas isn't either, and it's here to stay, and get higher. While I am supportive of a rail in ground concept, I believe that a rubber tired BRT should be considered more strongly.

"The city recently awarded URS (which beat out HDR Engineering and CH2M HILL) a $437,500 contract--$375,000 in federal funds and an additional $125,000 split between the city and CCDC--to conduct what is technically known as an Alternative Analysis. WHERE DID THE DIFFERENCE OF $62,500.00 GO? "Equally important would be the circulator's proximity to a planned multi-modal center. The Gardner Company recently closed a $43 million deal to buy the landmark U.S. Bank Plaza—at Capitol Boulevard and Main Street—with hopes of putting a $12 million multi-modal transit hub at its base. IS THE GARDNER COMPANY SETTING THE STAGE FOR BOISE PROPERTY OWNERS TO PAY FOR "THEIR" MODAL TRANSIT HUB? WE PROPERTY OWNERS HAVE ALREADY GIVEN THE GARDNER COMPANY CLOSE TO $5 MILLION TOWARDS THE NEW ZIONS BANK BUILDING!

"Oldemeyer insisted that the city had its marching orders in solving transportation issues.

"If the city wants to help with transportation issues spend the monies to find out why fuel in the area has been over $3.00 GALLON HIGHER THAN THE NATIONAL PRICE PRETTY MUCH ALL YEAR!

"Our citizen surveys say that transportation is the No. 1 issue," he said. "I have to ask what other issues were up for grab? WASTEFUL SPENDING? And there are three pieces to that: How do you successfully get people into Boise from the west side of the Valley? DO YOU MEAN Nampa, Meridian, Eagle or the west side of Boise? Then, how do you get them around the downtown core? And that's where a downtown circulator comes into play. And thirdly, how do you move people outside of the downtown core, and that's the bus system." SO I
It will only be used depending on the hours and how often it comes around. I come from Seattle with an excellent bus system that I used ALL of the time. Here I can only get on the bus every hour if that and it stops running SOGO early. I think that Boise is ready for a system like this and it would definitely be utilized if it is convenient not just based on where it is going but how often and how late...

So how do people get from the transit system or BSU back home? They drive their car. Where are they going to park? This isn't solving the problem. I live downtown and work in west Boise. I love the bus, but it doesn't provide me or anyone else the ability to come into work early or leave late. My daughter also rides the bus to work. She works at one of those downtown restaurants you so much want people to frequent, but she has to walk or ride her bike the five miles home after dark. Please spent the money on a better bus system. More people would ride the bus if their were longer hours and provided full service on weekends. I can walk the couple of miles from downtown to BSU.

This was NEVER about providing useful transportation. If it were, they sure wouldn't have been talking about putting in a streetcar.

I wrote this analysis almost 3 years ago, so some of the links may no longer work, but the basic information has not changed.

http://noboissettcar.blogspot.com/

Don't believe it. It's a California hippie plot. Buy pick-up trucks and drive them where you want to go.