All Aboard: Public Transportation by the People, for the People

By Gordon Glass

Introduction

Atlanta is on the precipice of a potentially gargantuan improvement to its public transportation network. The Atlanta Streetcar, set to begin serving passengers in 2014, will run a 2.7 mile track in downtown Atlanta.\(^1\) The streetcar is an electric tram following a rail constructed into the roads of Atlanta, and the vision for that tram is expansive.\(^2\) Atlanta has the capability of being a city where multiple forms of public transportation work together to form a seamless transportation network. However, efficient public transportation requires citizen involvement. Without the help of the residents, the Atlanta Streetcar, a potential conduit for successful public transportation expansion, could settle as a very expensive failed project. If Atlanta is to be treated with the respect afforded to the great cities of the world, the residents cannot back down from opportunities such as the Atlanta Streetcar. In this short post, I will first provide an example of the successful implementation of a comparable transportation system, and then I will highlight the goals that Atlanta residents can accomplish through participation in public transportation expansion.

A. Germans hop on the Strassenbahn (Straßenbahn).

Strassenbahn systems (German streetcars) are scattered throughout cities across Germany. A quick look at a map of Germany shows Strassenbahn systems in roughly 50 cities.\(^3\) Frequently, the implementation of a Strassenbahn system is accompanied by other forms of transportation, such as subways or buses.\(^4\) However, for smaller cities, or cities like Bremen (with a population of roughly 550,000) a Strassenbahn is typically sufficient to fulfill all transportation needs.\(^5\) The use of Strassenbahn systems in numerous German cities is evidence of great German support for public transportation in the form of trams. The Strassenbahn systems have proven themselves to be highly useful to Germans, even as a sole means of public transportation. Further, Strassenbahn systems have been implemented together with subways and buses to great effect.

B. Conducting change!

The Atlanta Streetcar needs support. Right now, the streetcar is suited for easy transportation through downtown Atlanta. However, the 2.7 mile corridor seems like an island, with only one direct

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\(^2\) See http://streetcar.atlantaga.gov/what-is-the-atlanta-streetcar/

\(^3\) See http://www.urbanrail.net/eu/de/index.html

\(^4\) See http://www.urbanrail.net/eu/de/index.html ; http://www.lonelyplanet.com/germany/transport/getting-around#97969

\(^5\) See http://www.urbanrail.net/eu/de/index.html ; http://www.citypopulation.de/php/germany-bremen.php
connection to MARTA at Peachtree Center and three close express bus connections. The residents of Atlanta, through their support, will determine whether the current route is treated as Hawaii or if its only company will be Tom Hanks and a volleyball. While the Atlanta Streetcar bears the burden of providing the incentive to support its use, expansion of the system would serve the public interest in improved public transportation. A survey conducted (no pun intended) in 2013 by the Atlanta Regional Commission showed a majority of Atlanta’s residents considered public transportation to be very important for Atlanta’s future. However, if Atlanta residents want public transportation growth, they have to capitalize on their opportunities.

If the Atlanta Streetcar receives the necessary support, residents can expect additional lines and expansion. Streetcar expansion would likely lead to more MARTA connections. With more MARTA connections, an actively supported streetcar could potentially stimulate support for MARTA expansion as well. Residents experiencing efficient transportation throughout the city, connecting to MARTA, will have greater incentive to utilize MARTA. By receiving the extra support, MARTA will have more opportunity to grow, and more citizens would likely approve that growth to further simplify their connected transportation experiences. In other words, improved public transportation in Atlanta is often associated with the expansion of MARTA into the suburbs. With a large streetcar system, there would be new incentive for residents of the suburbs to take MARTA into Atlanta and use the streetcar while in the city. This would provide increased revenue for MARTA, and it could also create interest in expanding the MARTA system to better suit the needs of suburb residents. As a domino effect, the initial 2.7 mile corridor of the Atlanta Streetcar could be the first step to a connected transportation system of buses, subway lines, and streetcar lines. The seemingly huge city of Atlanta, often criticized for urban sprawl, has the potential to provide transportation sufficient for many residents to leave their cars at home, benefitting the environment, resident health, and the economy.

**Conclusion**

A majority of Atlanta residents famously complain about traffic and public transportation. Unlike many German cities, Atlanta does not have an extensive, successful public transportation network to satisfy its people. The first step to improving public transportation is before Atlanta now. Atlanta can move away from urban sprawl and become a connected network of public transportation options. While these options provide efficiency now, residents can also look to the future. Improved public transportation also leads to increased development. Therefore, the Atlanta Streetcar could be more than the start of a massive transportation improvement; it could stimulate real development and growth throughout the region. However, if Atlanta is to improve, it needs resident support one change at a time, and the first step to a connected Atlanta is the Atlanta Streetcar. All aboard!

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Gordon Glass, a dual citizen of the United States and Germany, graduated cum laude from the University of North Georgia in 2012 with a B.S. in Political Science Pre-Law. He is currently working toward a J.D. and a Certificate in Environmental and Land Use Law with an anticipated graduation date of May 2016. Gordon is a member of the GSU Moot Court Board and will compete in the ABA National Appellate Advocacy Competition in the spring. He is currently working as a Graduate Research Assistant for Professor Ryan Rowberry, associate director of the Center for the Comparative Study of Metropolitan Growth. Gordon joined the Urban Fellows Program to learn more about metropolitan growth and to discuss and develop ideas for both his future and the future of the great cities of the world. Gordon plans on working as an attorney focusing on land use issues.