

Politics & Government

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# Three Years Later, Milwaukee Streetcar is Back on Council Agenda

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A rendering of the proposed streetcar.  
Credit: The Milwaukee Streetcar

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Emotions could run high this week and next as the Milwaukee Common Council considers a streetcar for downtown.

A committee will hold a public hearing on Tuesday. The council and mayor have already heard plenty of opinions.

For the most part, a streetcar seems to have support among people who live and work in Milwaukee's Third Ward. The proposed line would initially link the ward and downtown. Jared Looze is bar manager at the Wicked Hop on W. St. Paul Avenue. The streetcar would run right by the front door.

"It will help with public transportation, which I think Milwaukee as a large Midwestern city lacks behind," Looze says. "All other major metropolitan areas seem to have better public transit than Milwaukee besides the buses."

Looze believes a streetcar would bring in more business to the Third Ward. Dawn Bloomfield thinks people would use it to get to her bar. Club Charlie's is located at the south end of the neighborhood. "Once it's in, people are going to use it," Bloomfield says.

However, she worries local business might suffer during the three years it would take to lay the tracks and install the other infrastructure.

"If they don't tear up intersections all at the same time, people can still get in here. If they tear up Broadway and Milwaukee at the same time, that's going to make it a little tough,"

Bloomfield says.

“I think there might be some businesses that would suffer from that a little bit.” Courtney Mueller is manager at Colectivo Coffee, also in the Third Ward. “But then again we’ve had so much construction around Milwaukee in the past couple years that hopefully they’d be able to bounce back,” Mueller says.

Mueller says she’d also be pleased, if the city would eventually extend a streetcar line north of downtown, heading toward UW-Milwaukee. She’s a student there.

Ald. Bob Bauman says the city must think ahead. He supports the project.

“It basically boils down to this. We’re either going to move the city forward, or we’re going to move backward” Bauman says. “We’re either going to unlock the potential that this city has to offer, or we’re not. We’re either going to compete with other large cities across the country, or we’re not.”

Bauman voted in favor of the streetcar plan three years ago. City leaders spent months drawing up plans and preparing for groundbreaking. Then, the Legislature passed a law forbidding We Energies from covering the cost of moving utility lines for a streetcar.

In recent weeks, Mayor Barrett proposed a different means of paying – by creating two tax incremental financing districts. The city would lend the money, then hope to recoup it in increased tax collections. Ald. Joe Davis plans to vote ‘no.’

“The cost of the streetcar to the taxpayers because of state legislation, which now puts the responsibility of paying for any relocation of utility costs, is unacceptable and quite frankly it’s irresponsible,” Davis says.

The proposed streetcar line now carries a price tag of \$123 million. About half the money would come from a federal grant. Davis says even if cost wasn’t an issue, he doubts his north side constituents would even ride a streetcar.

The issue could make its way before the full Common Council next week. If approved, and the Legislature does not intervene, groundbreaking would begin in 2015.

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