

# Portland streetcar success has fueled interest elsewhere

By **Judy Keen**, USA TODAY  
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Electric streetcars on tracks increased in use for a brief period after World War II. Most, like these in Atlanta, were replaced by other forms of transportation. AP



Jo Carter owns Physical Element, a women's boutique clothing store that runs along the streetcar line. She says the line has been a big part of the area's revitalization.

By Craig Mitchell for USA TODAY

A decade ago, the Pearl District in Portland, Ore., was a dicey warehouse area. A streetcar line that opened in 2001 helped transform it into a lively neighborhood with boutiques, condos and restaurants.

"It's very much a walking area, and the streetcar is a big part of that," says Jo Carter, owner of Physical Element, a clothing shop that opened in 2003 along the tracks. She

expects an extension of the streetcar line that's being built will bring more people into the area. "We're seeing a real revival," she says.

Portland's success helps to fuel a renaissance of electric streetcars on tracks in cities across the USA. This year, the U.S. Department of Transportation has awarded grants totaling \$258.6 million for streetcar projects in Portland, Tucson, Dallas, Cincinnati, Charlotte, St. Louis and Fort Worth.

Chandra Brown, president of the only U.S. streetcar manufacturer, United Streetcar in Clackamas, Ore., says it's making streetcars for Portland and Tucson and is "actively talking" to other cities. San Francisco, New Orleans, Tampa, Memphis and other cities already have streetcar systems.

In January, the Obama administration changed transit funding policies to make it easier for cities to get money for streetcars; cost-effectiveness was once the dominant criteria for proposed projects; now it's one of several factors, including land use, livability and economic development.

"We're sort of going back to the future," says Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, who remembers riding streetcars as a boy in Peoria, Ill. "People ... want to get out of congestion, they want a comfortable ride, they want it to be something they can afford. Buses provide that, but streetcars take people back to a time when you can really connect communities."

Horse-drawn streetcars appeared on urban streets in the early 1800s and were replaced by electric versions in the 1880s and 1890s, says Jerry Kelly of the Baltimore Streetcar Museum. In the 1930s, when the Great Depression put many people out of work, ridership fell. After a brief revival during World War II, affordable automobiles and cheap gas prompted many cities to pave over streetcar tracks, he says.

"I am somewhat surprised" by the renewed interest in streetcars, Kelly says, "but I always wanted them to be back."

Mike Szilagyi, a planner for a Philadelphia company who maintains a website about the city's streetcar history, says the time is right for streetcars, which make downtowns more accessible and get people out of their cars. "A streetcar ride is more comfortable, more civilized," he says.

Streetcars work because they appeal to people who want to live in cities and are "proven to have the ability to attract investment," says John Smatlak of RPR Consulting, a Los Angeles company that helps plan streetcar projects.

Projects are planned in:

- Charlotte. Economic development is "one of the primary drivers, if not the primary driver" of a long-term plan for a 10-mile line, Assistant City Manager Jim Schumacher says. Work will start in 2011 on the first leg, a 1.5-mile downtown route.
- Dallas. One vintage streetcar line is operating, and two lines are in the works with construction set to begin in 2011. "Everybody wants it," says Keith Manoy, senior program manager for transportation planning. "The entire focus is what it can do to revitalize our downtown."
- Cincinnati. The City Council voted this month to authorize the first phase of a streetcar system to replace one shut down in 1951. "It's a really great time for streetcars and a great time for the rebirth of cities," says Michael Moore, interim director of planning and engineering.

In 2008, a study by the city found that Portland's streetcar system had generated \$3.5 billion in investments and prompted construction of 10,212 housing units within two blocks of the line.

The Pearl District has had "a fraction" of the business closures experienced by other Portland neighborhoods during the recession, says Joshua Ryan, executive director of the Pearl District Business Association.

"It's the hottest place in the city," he says. "It's the safest district, the cleanest district. ... The benefits of streetcars have surpassed our expectations."