

How Does Streetcar Performance Compare in Five US Cities? What Lessons Can Be Applied Elsewhere?

Mineta Transportation Institute's free report investigates systems in Little Rock, Memphis, Portland, Seattle, and Tampa

San Jose, Calif., February 17, 2015 – When cities consider building streetcar (trolley) systems, they often point to Portland OR as a guarantee of success. However, it's not that simple. Many specific factors must be taken into account, or the project could under-perform, as it has in some other cities. That is the conclusion of the [Mineta Transportation Institute's](#) latest peer-reviewed research report, *[The Purpose, Function, and Performance of Streetcar Transit in the Modern U.S. City: A Multiple Case Study Investigation](#)*. The study focused on five US cities with streetcars or trolleys. Principal investigator was Jeffrey Brown, PhD, with Hilary Nixon, PhD, and Enrique Ramos. The free report can be downloaded from <http://transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1201.html>

Dr. Brown said. "This study examines the experiences of the modern-era streetcars operated in Little Rock, Memphis, Portland, Seattle, and Tampa. We discovered that in these cities, the streetcar's primary purpose was to be a development tool. A second objective was to be a tourism-promoting amenity, such as in Little Rock and Tampa. Transportation objectives were largely afterthoughts with the notable exception of Portland, and to a lesser degree, Seattle."

Key informant interviews revealed that in most cities, private sector actors from the local development and downtown business communities as well streetcar advocacy groups were the key forces behind streetcar implementation. These actors did so in order to use the streetcar primarily to achieve development goals.

When assessed as transportation, Portland's streetcar emerged as the clear standout performer with the highest ridership and service productivity and the second-most cost effective service. Portland was also the only city in which streetcar performance (service productivity and cost effectiveness) measures surpass that of the average local bus.

Based on this study, the authors made some primary suggestions for cities planning their own streetcar services:

- Think carefully about the fundamental purpose of any proposed streetcar plans. Then proceed in all decision making with that fundamental purpose clearly in mind.
- Regard the example of Portland with much more caution. Many streetcar advocates point to Portland's experience and then assume that it could be easily replicated elsewhere.
- Realize that Portland's experience is the result of a unique combination of external factors (local population and employment patterns, the health of the real estate market) and local decisions (land development policy decisions, financial decisions, other public investments, streetcar alignment location and length, streetcar operations decisions, streetcar fare policy decisions) that may or may not be applicable elsewhere.

In addition to an overall discussion of the research methodology and key findings, the report also includes detailed information about each city's streetcar system. These include the best characteristics of that system; local socioeconomic context for the system; land use and

development context; historical background on streetcar development; ridership and performance; insights from each key informant interview; and conclusions.

Download the full report: The 423-page report, including 99 figures and 78 tables, is available for free, no-registration download at <http://transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1201.html>

Tweet this: #Mineta Institute research on #streetcar performance in 5 US cities gives insights, cautions. Free PDF. <http://ow.ly/Iz3Rq>

ABOUT THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS

Jeffrey Brown, PhD, is associate professor, department chair, and Master's Program director in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at Florida State University. His research interests include transportation finance, transportation history, and public transportation policy and planning. He holds a BA in geography, and an MA and a PhD in urban planning from the University of California, Los Angeles.

Hilary Nixon, PhD, is an associate professor of urban and regional planning at San José State University. Her research and teaching interests in environmental planning and policy focus on the relationship between environmental attitudes and behavior, particularly with respect to waste management and linkages between transportation and the environment. She holds a BA in environmental management from the University of Rochester and a PhD in planning, policy, and design from the University of California, Irvine.

Luis Enrique Ramos, M.Arch, MP, is a doctoral student in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at Florida State University. His research interests include the evolution of inner-ring suburbs, multidisciplinary social-ecological urban research, sustainable transportation, determinants of transit ridership, and transportation/ land-use interactions. He holds a Bachelors and a Masters in architecture from Tulane University, New Orleans and a Masters in urban and regional planning from the University of Puerto Rico – Graduate School of Planning.

ABOUT THE MINETA TRANSPORTATION INSTITUTE

The Mineta Transportation Institute (MTI) conducts research, education, and information transfer programs regarding surface transportation policy and management issues, especially related to transit. Congress established MTI in 1991 as part of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act. MTI won national re-designation competitions in 2002, 2006 and 2012. The Institute is funded through the US Secretary of Transportation's Research and Technology Office, US Department of Homeland Security's Transportation Security Administration, the California Department of Transportation's Division of Research, Innovation and Systems Development, and public and private grants. In 2006 the US Department of Homeland Security selected MTI as a National Transportation Security Center of Excellence. The internationally respected members of the MTI Board of Trustees represent all major surface transportation modes. MTI, the lead institute for the nine-university Mineta National Transit Research Consortium, is affiliated with San Jose (CA) State University's College of Business. Visit transweb.sjsu.edu

###

Contact: Donna Maurillo
MTI Communications Director
831-234-4009 (mobile)
donna.maurillo (at) sjsu.edu