

Fort Worth Star-Telegram

LOCAL NEWS

Fort Worth council still considering streetcar idea, needs the money

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FORT WORTH -- A proposed \$250 million city streetcar system is still alive although the City Council has questions about how to pay for it and how its routes should be drawn.

On Tuesday, the council appeared to reach a consensus on spending \$1.8 million for a consultant's study of a proposed system. The council could vote on that contract as soon as next week.

"We do need to make sure that everyone who hears us does not get the false assumption that we figured out where all the funding comes from," Councilman Danny Scarth said.

A proposal for building about 20 miles of streetcar lines, including a loop through downtown and connections to the Cultural District and the near south side, hit a snag last month when the Federal Transit Administration turned down Fort Worth's application for a \$25 million grant.

Council members questioned Tuesday whether the whole approach is right and whether the streetcar plan is crowding out other transportation projects, particularly roads in outlying areas.

"There is a perception in the new growth communities that we're doing a lot downtown and we're not doing a lot out there," Councilman Sal Espino said.

Others questioned the cost and how the proposal would fit with other types of transit. Fort Worth already has a bus system and a commuter rail line to Dallas.

"We learned from some of our peer cities -- having that additional mode can actually increase the ridership on regional rail," assistant planning director Dana Burghdoff said.

Popular with planners

The city has studied the feasibility of commuter rail, light rail and streetcars since 1996.

In 2008, some council members toured streetcar systems in Seattle, Tacoma, Wash., and Portland, Ore.

The cost of streetcars in those cities has averaged \$15 million to \$30 million per mile. That's less than the cost of freeways, which can run as high as \$100 million a mile in urban areas.

Streetcars are popular among urban planners because they provide a low-polluting way to move people around towns. They're also thought to promote denser development, which brings in additional taxes.

That's a key argument because one of the city's plans to pay for the system involves using special tax districts that divert tax money from new development into a special fund.

Councilman Joel Burns, who has been a proponent of streetcars, said a consultant's study might help Fort Worth qualify for other federal grants.

"Other cities are in there working hard to get these monies in a way that we need to play a little catch-up on," Burns said.

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