



Arkansas trip persuades Augusta group to support trolley

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They aren't fence-sitting any longer.

After visiting the streetcar system in Arkansas' capital city, the committee studying a light rail streetcar system for downtown Augusta has slid over to the side of feasible. But the numbers aren't in yet.

"It's an impressive system, what they've done over there," said Steve Cassell, the city's traffic engineer, after returning from Little Rock, Ark. "Talking to some of the developers, they love it. It was something to see to believe. It meshes well in the traffic. We couldn't find anybody who didn't like it."

The committee of four spent two days with River Rail, which serves Little Rock and North Little Rock. The streetcar system started in 2004 and has spawned \$400 million in development along the rails.

"You have to look at why they did their trolley. It wasn't for ridership originally; it was mostly as an economic-development tool," said Margaret Woodard, the executive director of the Downtown Development Authority of Augusta, which is commissioning the local study. Now that the exploratory trip has concluded, the information will be compiled into the feasibility study, which will be delivered to the authority's board during its Aug. 13 meeting, Ms. Woodard said.

"I wish, before people would be so critical about it, they would get a visual of it," said Juriah Lewis, the transit planner for the planning commission. He said a system in Augusta would be more expensive to operate than in Little Rock. Transit is a department in Augusta; it is a transit authority in Little Rock where "they have the ability to go after their own money".

Whether the streetcars would bog down the city's transit system is a main factor in its feasibility, as is its construction funding.

A proposed route of 2.5 miles is on the table from the engineering firm URS. The estimated cost of the light rail is \$25 million. URS is looking into a federal transportation department program called Fast Starts, which would pay for 90 percent of the cost.

Little Rock used a transportation department program called Small Starts, which pays up to 80 percent. "They looked at it as an investment, not an expenditure. This was going to bring future investment. Look at the tax base they've grown," Ms. Woodard said. The development that followed the light rail included a stadium, sports arena, hotels and condos.

Mr. Cassell said the system also seemed to have good ridership. "That's what you want. You don't want a system that nobody uses". "Downtown 2 o'clock in the afternoon, what I would not consider a busy time, there were 25 people waiting to get on the trolley," Ms. Woodard said.

The streetcar in Augusta would be part of a linked transit system. Officials have previously said they could move the bus station to Seventh Street and transfer riders from the streetcars to buses. The downtown rail system would allow the city to shift three or four bus routes to other areas.

"You're always going to have the detractors, and you're going to have the supporters. Try to get everyone to the same table. We would hope it would work here in time," Mr. Cassell said. "We're in our infancy on how this would spur development. What we need right now is a champion to get behind it, a large developer or politician."
