

Streetcars grew Victoria out; today they can help Victoria grow up

by [Tristin Hopper](#) • Thursday, December 31, 2009

<http://vibrantvictoria.ca/?p=1652>

Bombardier's "Flexity" line of streetcars, pictured above, will be used along Vancouver's new Olympic streetcar line to start operating in 2010.

Photo © by Bombardier.



The streetcar is finally returning to BC. Between January and March 2010, the City of Vancouver is shipping in a pair of ultra-modern Belgian streetcars to speed revellers between downtown Olympic venues.

Streetcars are "a clean, sustainable public transit option for which we believe the day has once again come," said Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan in a 2008 press release.

Victoria has also been dabbling in light rail – if only on paper. For only \$16 million, Langford could run a regular tram to Downtown Victoria and dramatically reduce highway congestion and emissions, says a 2008 [feasibility study](#).

Yet only sixty-one years ago, light rail in Victoria was far from a futuristic transit concept. In fact, by the end of World War II, Victorians saw light rail as nothing more than a dilapidated relic of the 19th century.

In 1890, long before the construction of the Empress Hotel or even the Legislative Buildings, streetcar bells were heard for the first time on Victoria streets.

In February of that year, a single streetcar pulled out hesitantly from its North Downtown garage and slowly inched towards the Inner Harbour.

When regular service started up a few days later, Hillside, James Bay and even the Royal Jubilee Hospital found themselves joined by Canada's third-ever streetcar system.

Inside, the cars were showily decorated with ashwood panelling, cherrywood furnishing and polished brass. Ads for "Athlete Cigarettes" and "Elephant Brand Mixed Paints" were emblazoned on the exterior. Fare was only a nickel – equal to roughly a dollar in today's money.

"In the evening they were brilliantly illuminated and, filled with passengers, dashed through the streets in busy metropolitan style; the admiration of all lovers of enterprise, convenience and progress," wrote Douglas Parker in the 1981 book, *No Horsecars in Paradise*.

Demand was swift. The city's small fleet of clattering streetcars offered a cheap, clean alternative to horse travel along Victoria's muddy streets.

Almost immediately, the rail network began to expand. Soon, tracks were laid as far as Esquimalt, Beacon Hill Park, the Uplands and Willows Beach.

Slow, unsteady and easy to derail, Victoria's streetcar fleet nevertheless set the stage for the city's regional growth. Fitted with cow-catchers, streetcars were sent into the deepest depths of Victoria's budding suburbia.

Municipalities like Esquimalt and Oak Bay had previously been accessible only by sea or dirt path. Now, they were within an hour's reach of downtown. Backed by the streetcar, suburban development took off.

BC Transit considered installing a line of double-decker streetcars to run from Chinatown to James Bay.

"Interurban" rails were flung even further. Train lines were strung along the length of the Peninsula, pulling Deep Cove and Brentwood Bay into Victoria's transit network. A one-way trip to Brentwood Bay took less than an hour.

Streetcar officials even played the tourist card. For 50 cents, visitors could get a three-hour tour of Victoria's entire urban rail network in an open-topped observation car.

By 1938, however, city officials were already beginning to grow weary of Victoria's loud, aging transit vehicles. Private automobiles were hitting city streets in droves, and motorized buses promised faster, smoother and more flexible urban transportation.

World War II gave the streetcars a patriotic last gasp. The threat of gas shortages postponed Victoria's motorized transit designs and kept the electric railway running. As soon as peace was declared, knives came out for Victoria's urban railway.

More than 50 kilometres of rails were torn up and sent for scrap. Copper trolley wire was pulled down. Cars were sold off at bargain prices to be used as bunkhouses, cottages, theatres, tool sheds and chicken coops.

Vancouver, Winnipeg and Montreal eagerly followed suit by scrapping their own urban rail lines. By the 1950s, only Toronto's streetcars remained. It would only take 50 years for these cities to regret it.

Once an obstacle to the diesel bus, streetcars are now being hailed as the future for urban transportation. They're quiet. They're zero emission vehicles. They're even safer; Victoria could see traffic deaths drop by up to 36 per cent if it went back to streetcars, read a December 2008 [study](#) by the Victoria Transport Policy Institute.

As far back as 1993, BC Transit considered installing a line of double-decker streetcars to run from Chinatown to James Bay. Five years earlier, a group of local history enthusiasts had attempted to install a tourist-friendly downtown streetcar line, much like in San Francisco.

But still, both those projects didn't have the benefit of high gas prices, unprecedented traffic congestion and the threat of climate change to spur them along. "The climate is right for trains," reads an advertising slogan by Canadian transportation giant Bombardier.

Streetcars helped young cities like Victoria and Vancouver to grow out. Now, the same technology can help these cities grow up.

VibrantVictoria.ca's discussion forum has several discussion threads dedicated to light rail, commuter rail and local transit operations. To stay up to date on the latest news and event concerning Victoria's infrastructure, refer to the following discussion threads:

- [Commuter rail](#)
- [E&N Railway discussion](#)
- [Streetcars in Victoria](#) (historical discussion incl. photos)
- [Victoria Regional Transit System news \(BC Transit\)](#)

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