

Trolleys, the Public Good, and Political Will

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Many of us involved in public transit issues in Northwest Philadelphia are eager to see the return of the 23 Trolley on Germantown Avenue. Indeed, public transit activists around the world are seeking to create or recreate the trolley systems, which now go under the name "light rail." Trolleys are much more energy efficient than buses. Each trolley can carry far more people than a bus, while at the same time giving each rider a bit more room and a much smoother ride. Most people prefer riding trolley to buses and evidence from around the world suggests that transit ridership declines when buses replace trolleys. Ridership has declined on the 23 line by at least a third since the buses started running in place of trolleys on Germantown Avenue.

Reviving the 23 trolley would be particularly beneficial in Northwest Philadelphia where the trolley could be an important part of our effort to bring people to the historic sites in Germantown and Mt. Airy. Yet some folks don't have good memories of our trolleys. Some people remember how unpleasant it was to be caught behind a trolley as moved up and down the avenue and realize that it is easier to get around a bus as it pulls over to pick up and discharge passengers. And most of us remember that the trolleys on the 23 line were dilapidated, not air-conditioned, and did not provide a terribly smooth ride.

It is because of these bad memories that trolley advocates were so eager to see the trolley restored on the Girard Avenue 15 line. SEPTA has spent \$82 million restoring the tracks and rehabilitating the old PCC trolley cars. The mechanical equipment of the new / old cars have been totally rebuilt. New suspensions will provide a smooth ride; air-conditioning has been installed; and new, roomier seats installed. Even more importantly, the new trolley line incorporates "transit-first" technology. With transit-first technology, trolleys approaching a traffic light can stop it from turning red. We did not want to drive behind the old trolleys. But, with these new trolley systems, we will want to be behind them because they will help us get through traffic lights more quickly. Transit first technology makes it possible to run trolleys much more quickly which improves service for riders. And, because the throughput is increased, more trolleys can be run a day. Saving even a few minutes on each run of a train adds up pretty quickly over the course of a day and thus creates room for more as well as better service.

Unfortunately, we still do not have good examples of transit first technology in Philadelphia. A year after it was supposed to re-open, we are still waiting for 15 trolley line to be restored. And, even though transit first technology has been installed on the existing trolley lines that run through West Philadelphia, that technology remains unused. In both cases, SEPTA has been stymied by local opposition and the failure of our politicians to overcome it.

The Girard Avenue Trolley has been stalled because of the opposition of Fourth Ward leader Carol Campbell. Campbell is, rightly, concerned with protecting three blocks in her ward. The trolley ran down one side of these three blocks. When the trolley closed, people on these blocks took advantage of its absence to park on both sides of the street. Now they don't want to give up these parking spaces. In order to run the trolley down these three blocks, either the parking spaces have to be removed or the street has to become one way. Another possibility is that SEPTA could spend over a half million dollars to move the trolley tracks into the middle of the street and a city ordinance could be passed that would allow a two-way street and two parking lanes in a slightly narrower street than usual.

SEPTA is willing to accommodate the neighbors. But so far, Ms. Campbell has been unwilling to negotiate with SEPTA. There are a number of serious issues this community has had with SEPTA. SEPTA acknowledges that the Callowhill Depot has been a problem for neighbors for many years, not least because SEPTA worker take parking spots on residential streets. However, SEPTA has tried a number of ways to reach out to the neighbors and Ms. Campbell to discuss these difficulties and find a way to overcome them. I also tried to contact her on behalf of the Pennsylvania Transit Coalition, with the hopes that our organization could help work out the problems between the neighborhood and SEPTA. But, so far, Ms. Campbell has been unwilling to discuss these issues with SEPTA or the PTC. And no city

leader—including Councilman Michael Nutter whose district includes the Fourth Ward, or Mayor Street—have been willing or able to bring any resolution to this issue.

Similar problems are found on the existing West Philadelphia Trolley lines. Transit first technology has been installed on these lines. Yet, for them to be effective, trolley stops have to be move from before traffic lights to after them. (There is no use in controlling traffic lights if a trolley has to stop to pick up passengers before a traffic light.) Moving trolley stops has, however, created a great deal of controversy in Councilwoman Blackwell's district. And, once again, no political leaders have been able to resolve these conflicts. So, while transit-first technology has been installed it remains unused.

Thus, those of us who hope to see the 23 trolley restored remain frustrated. Restoring the trolleys has always been a difficult proposition because of the uncoordinated nature of our transit system. Even though trolleys are, all things considered, more efficient than buses, they are not favored by SEPTA. The reason is quite simple. Much of the infrastructure for trolleys—the tracks and overhead wires—have to be paid for and maintained by SEPTA. On the other hand, the infrastructure for buses—our streets—are paid for by the city and PennDOT. Those costs are substantial: the heavy buses run on Germantown Avenue do substantial damage to our streets, requiring much more frequent repair and replacement. Thus, while the overall costs of buses are higher, SEPTA does not pay all those costs. So, what is sensible from the perspective of the public as a whole, is not sensible from SEPTA's perspective. We can blame SEPTA, of course. But, given that public transit has been so underfunded, it scarcely makes sense to do so before we attain adequate funding from the state. (Perhaps we can make a case for overcoming the constitutional limit on using gas taxes for public transit by showing that trolleys actually reduce the cost of maintaining our roads.)

At any rate, despite the costs, SEPTA was willing to restore the 15 trolley and install transit first technology on other trolley lines. SEPTA promised then Mayor Rendell to restore the 23 trolley on Germantown Avenue as well. But unless we can develop the political leadership to get the 15 trolley and transit first technology running, it will be difficult to get SEPTA to keep that promise.