

COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Department of Transportation Performance Oversight Hearing
Statement of
Monte Edwards

Friday, February 26, 2010

I support the Department of Transportation's plan for a 37 mile streetcar system. I oppose their proposal to use overhead wires to power it. Overhead wires would introduce an element that has been intentionally avoided and prohibited for over a century. Washington is one of the most significant wire-free networks in the world. This distinct, wireless character of our City has been protected in planning doctrine since the late 1800's. That has allowed Washington's downtown streets to be clear of projecting infrastructure and wires that would interfere with our viewsheds. Even traffic lights and street signs have been installed on posts at the curb rather than on cantilevered arms or cables across traffic lanes as in other cities.

I attended the January 28th Streetcar Technology Showcase held by the City of Charlotte, NC. The focus of the conference was non-overhead wire technology. I spoke to City officials and six participating streetcar equipment manufacturers. I inquired not only about technology but also whether the manufacturers qualify under the Buy America Act. The answer is "yes:" all of the exhibiting manufacturers have US manufacturing facilities and have supplied streetcar/rail equipment to US customers. Breda supplied 466 of our Metro cars and CAF supplied 192. Bombardier supplied Amtrak with the Acela equipment. The three remaining exhibitors have supplied equipment to streetcar and light rail systems in other US locales.

Battery and ultra-capacitor technology is advancing rapidly. Ultra capacitors that can recharge in 20 seconds (Trainelec/CAF) and batteries that can run for 3 km (Kinki Sharyo) offer the possibility of recharging at the passenger stops with no need for overhead wires or other means to supply power between stops. In fact, the CAF system that will enter service this fall in Saragossa, Spain will do exactly that. Ultra capacitors also offer the ability to capture and store braking energy to provide faster acceleration, without requiring increased electric capacity. Non-overhead power can be supplied by conductors mounted on the surface of the street (Ansaldo Bredo) or under the pavement and thus are immune from weather and snowplows (Bombardier).

The information contained in the attachment demonstrates that the District of Columbia can have an effective non-overhead wire streetcar system. As such, it would be a showcase system, likely to attract the best of the streetcar suppliers as well as substantial congressional funding. Most importantly, it would afford residents the same protected viewsheds throughout the City that DDot plans to provide tourists in terms of "monumental" viewsheds.