

Unpublished Letter to Editor of Washington Post
2010

To the Editor:

I support Streetcars for DC. Streetcars can spur economic development, connect neighborhoods, and relieve Metro overcrowding. Along with a well-maintained subway and bus system, streetcars can provide significant environmental benefits as well as personal mobility. I disagree with the editorial, "Let's get rolling" (April 13).

I disagree with the implication of the statement that "The District has laid track and purchased cars...": the District has purchased 3 cars. We should not put the cart before the horse, and end up with a 3% solution by allowing those 3 cars determine the design of our planned 37 mile system that will likely require 100 cars. I also disagree that some compromise is needed in order for this important transportation project to proceed, because I know of no one advocating any delay. I challenge the editorial's supposition that wireless alternatives are more costly and less reliable than an overhead wire system, because DC has done no evaluation of these alternative technologies.

Yes, evaluation and analysis need to be done, but the Streetcar Project need not be stopped while they are being done. DDOT estimates it will be at least 2 1/2 years until the first streetcars roll. The City needs to use the first part of that time to independently analyze and evaluate initial capital and long-term (operating and maintenance) costs of alternative propulsion systems, and weigh the pros and cons of those systems.

Currently, there is no systematic independent engineering study of the range of technologies and their applicability to our City. The good news is that wireless technology is in use, and our City can build on the evaluation of that technology that has been done by others. Charlotte, NC, has prepared a report evaluating non-overhead wire technology that is to be published this month. Kawasaki has been operating the SWIMO system in Japan since 2007. CAF of Spain initiated non-overhead wire service in Seville, Spain, last week, and is now installing a non-overhead wire system in Saragossa.

Bombardier is installing a non-overhead wire system in Germany this summer. Those systems were evaluated and determined to be reliable and economically viable. Those evaluations can provide DC with a baseline and significant time-savings in its planning and evaluation of streetcar technology.

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