

Streetcar plans put in motion

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Pretty soon, you may be able to hop on a sleek streetcar and ride to a trendy restaurant, a hip boutique or a show at the Fox Theatre.

Atlanta civic and political leaders have unveiled a plan to bring streetcars back to the city, this time on Peachtree Street in downtown and Midtown. The streetcar could give the city an iconic image, like San Francisco's cable cars and New Orleans' streetcar, supporters say, while spurring new development.

The \$190 million plan will soon head to the Atlanta City Council for a vote.

THE PLAN: 10 miles of track along two main lines: on Peachtree, between Memorial Drive in downtown to the Woodruff Arts Center in Midtown; and an east-west loop connecting hot tourist spots such as the Georgia Aquarium and the Martin Luther King Jr. Historic District.

The plan is significantly scaled down from an earlier proposal that called for a 19-mile route, with streetcars rolling between Buckhead and Fort McPherson. But it's still one of the most ambitious streetcar efforts undertaken in the country in decades, and future phases are possible to extend the line.

THE VEHICLES: Streetcars would roll with regular traffic in the far right-hand lane, drawing power from overhead electric cables.

The cars would stop every quarter-mile or so and possibly have the ability to control traffic signals. The frequency of service hasn't been set, though it's common for streetcar lines to run every 10 to 15 minutes.

Plans call for purchasing 11 or 12 so-called modern streetcars, which cost about \$3 million each.

The vehicles — larger than a MARTA bus but smaller than a MARTA rail car — can travel up to 30 mph, and accommodate about 127 passengers, standing room included.

THE MONEY: The price tag for construction is estimated at

\$190 million

Operating the system is estimated to cost between \$5 million and \$6 million a year.

The plan includes several ways of covering the costs:

> A "special assessment district" would be created within a quarter-mile of the tracks, raising up to

\$142.5 million for construction.

Businesses and multifamily homes would see a property tax increase of perhaps 2 to 3 mills, or up to nearly 7 percent.

The tax bill for an owner of a \$200,000 condo would increase as much as \$160 to \$240 yearly.

> The city of Atlanta would kick in as much as

\$47.5 million for construction, paid out of the city's general fund.

> A parking tax of about 5 percent to 10 percent would be enacted to pay the streetcar's yearly operating costs.

THE POLITICS: Any plan that includes new taxes may run into trouble when it gets into politicians' hands — and that's just where the streetcar plan is headed.

The Atlanta City Council would have to approve the special assessment district and agree to spend general fund money.

The state Legislature would have to pass a law enabling Atlanta to pass a parking tax.

The plan has the support of business groups in Midtown and downtown, who would face a tax increase, as well as the backing of the city's largest parking lot operator — Michael Robison, owner of Lanier Parking, who was one of the first business leaders to champion the streetcar concept.

THE QUESTIONS: A host of issues remain unanswered or unresolved, from how much it will cost to ride the streetcar to who will build and operate the system.

Big-picture questions loom as well: Will enough people ride the system to justify the expense, particularly with the MARTA subway running parallel to much of the streetcar route.

THE MEETINGS: Want to have your opinions heard? Or just want to learn more? A series of public meetings are scheduled this month:

> Tuesday, 8-10 a.m., Troutman Sanders Conference Facility, Bank of America Plaza, 600 Peachtree St., Suite 5200.

> Tuesday, 6:30-8 p.m., Central Library Meeting Room, 1 Margaret Mitchell Square.

> Jan. 16, 6-8 p.m., AT&T Midtown 2 Building, 725 W. Peachtree St.

> Jan. 22, 6-8 p.m., First Presbyterian Church, 1328 Peachtree St.

Typical 'modern' streetcar 66 ft. long 8 ft., 1 in. wide 11 ft., 3.5 in. tall

CHARLES W. JONES / Staff Proposed route of the Peachtree streetcar as well as the MARTA routes and the boundary of the city's special assessment district. STREETCARS ALONG PEACHTREE Woodruff Arts Center Atlantic Station Piedmont Park Georgia Tech Aquarium North Ave. station Civic Center station 5 Points station Garnett station Ga. State station MLK station Oakland Cemetery Peachtree Center station Midtown station Arts Center station KEY Beltline Peachtree streetcar route MARTA stop MARTA route Special assessment district Sources: Peachtree Corridor Task Force, Portland Streetcar, <http://www.pdephotography.com/>, photo by Peter Ehrlich