



## The Impact of the Modern Streetcar on Tucson Land Use by Corky Poster • published in the March 2010 issue

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**T**he announcement of the federal \$63 million TIGER grant for the Modern Streetcar is extraordinary news for Tucson. This new transportation infrastructure, planned to open in late 2011, will have a more profound impact on the scope and character of downtown development than any single decision since the late 1960's. The 1960's Urban Renewal demolition of half of Barrio Viejo to make way for the Tucson Convention Center and the simultaneous growth of suburban shopping malls destroyed urban life in downtown Tucson for two generations. The Modern Streetcar is the best opportunity we have to breathe life back into the core of our City.

The Modern Streetcar is not the historic trolley. That hard-fought and admirable effort by Old Pueblo Trolley volunteers had been a great placeholder for the real transportation alternative that Tucson needs. The Trolley was largely an amusement ride. In contrast, the Modern Streetcar will travel at 10 minute headways from University Medical center at Campbell and Speedway to the Mercado District at the base of A Mountain. It will connect the two unique elements of Tucson's urban structure and will be the spine around which new development and new City life will grow. It will allow substantially increased interaction between UA/UMC campus to downtown and to Tucson's historic west-side. Most importantly it will be a focus for sustainable urban growth.

*The Downtown Links Land Use and Urban Design Plan's* goal is to develop an implementable plan that carries forward the revitalization goals and objectives of Downtown, the adjacent neighborhoods, the adjacent districts, and the various property owners and stakeholders. The introduction of that Mayor and Council-approved report states:

*"The Downtown Links Study Area occupies the critical mid-zone between the University of Arizona campus and the Downtown district. The intersection of Downtown Links and the proposed [now reality] Streetcar project provides a once-in-a-generation chance to get new/infill development right and make it transit-oriented."*

A goal of that study had two principle elements:

*"Promote transit-oriented development while protecting this area's fragile historic resources."*

With the Modern Streetcar funding from the federal government and the voter-approved RTA now complete, we now have the *Transit* we need to make this *transit-oriented* development concept a reality.

*Among the other recommendations of the Downtown Links Land Use and Urban Design Plan, the report singles out the district west of the North 4th Avenue District, south of 6th Street and north of the railroad tracks, to the Stone Avenue underpass. The report dubs this the Warehouse Triangle District and points out that, with the coming of the Modern Streetcar, we have a chance to redevelop... a Warehouse Triangle District with significantly increased intensity of land uses: very urban, mixed-use, University and Downtown-related, and arts-related.*

The report goes on to recommend that this area has the potential to be a place of :

*"...Transit-Oriented development...with much greater density."*

To date not a single neighborhood has raised objection to this increased density concept. Perhaps Tucson has finally found a way to increase urban densities with neighborhood concurrence and support. This is a significant and valuable development in Tucson and the Modern Streetcar is the essential piece for this “game-changing” urban model.

The Modern Streetcar will also provide many additional development opportunities. On Tucson’s west-side, the Rio Nuevo plans for the land at the base of A Mountain will get a great boost as the Streetcar crosses the Cushing Street bridge and connects to Tucson’s birthplace. It will give a great market incentive to the growing Mercado District development. It will augment the market for the proposed Convention Hotel and Convention Center Expansion.

It will also bolster the market for the development of vacant and under-utilized land along the Streetcar line and especially at the stops/stations. Of course, the historic character of these districts must be maintained and respected as we carefully plan increased intensity of land uses. Already the City of Tucson is working on optional overlay zones designed to protect fragile historic resources at the same time as it carefully enables better use of our land.

There are other land use and affordability issues that relate to the Streetcar. Recent data from the *Center for Neighborhood Technology* (Chicago) and the *University of Arizona Drachman Institute* verify the startling fact that a household at median income, with two cars, driving a combined total of 25,000 miles per year, will spend as much for the total costs of owning and operating those automobiles as they will for their total costs of housing (roughly \$14,000 each). And that the combined cost of these two big household expenses will consume almost 2/3 of that family’s gross income.

The Modern Streetcar will give a real transportation alternative for a significant number of people, but especially students, downtown and University-related staff and workers. If this imaginary family of four earning median income has a real transportation alternative that allows them to live in the City’s urban core and give up one of their two automobiles, they will get an instant \$7,000 increase in their disposable income. That can have a profound positive impact on housing affordability, and other family budget decisions.

The Modern Streetcar will move Tucson forward in providing an alternative urban choice for a portion of our community. It will create a real alternative way for some of us to live, so that as each of us make choices during our lives of where and how to live, we have a broader spectrum of opportunities to choose from. At the same time, the Streetcar is certain to create a stronger more vibrant, more interesting downtown that will serve of our community. And that is something worth celebrating.

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