

A century-old form of public transit has a new look—and lots of fans

Trolleys— by any other name

■ Up the streets of Sacramento and Portland, down to the Mexican border near San Diego and into the South Hills of Pittsburgh whiz contraptions that go by the unwieldy name of “light-rail mass transit.” But most Americans know them simply as trolleys, an all but extinct form of transport that’s enjoying a spectacular comeback, with a new look and new technology.

Rerailing the trolley is its cost advantage over subways. Transportation expert Joseph Schofer of Northwestern University says a heavy-duty subway—without the subway cars—costs as much as \$200 million a mile. But a trolley line built on an old railroad right-of-way can come in at \$5 million to \$10 million a mile. San Diego, for example, held down costs by acquiring a corridor to the Mexican border that the Southern Pacific was abandoning.

Buses that speed along in express highway lanes may be even cheaper to put on the road, but they bog down in center-city traffic. Trolleys also win out on the basis of reliability, and are favored by city planners for the real-estate development that seems to follow in their path. Explains Northwestern’s Schofer: “There’s a kind of sexiness that goes along with light rail. We drink light beer, and we go for light rail.”

After decades of talk, Los Angeles recently began building separate trolley and subway systems, financed with local tax revenue and federal money. Transit planners predict that by the year 2000 gridlock will freeze the city’s octopuslike freeways to a peak of 17 miles per hour. “It’s going to be very hard to keep up our mobility no matter what we do,” says spokeswoman Ann Reeves of the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission. At 55 miles per hour, light rail would seem supersonic.

Will they or won’t they?

In some cities, the chemistry already works. San Diego opened its first trolley line in 1981 and now attracts a loyal 23,000 riders each weekday. Fares offset 87 percent of operating costs—unusually high for any form of public transit—



The scene in Portland, Oreg., is the same, but 87 years apart. The new trolley connects eastern suburbs to downtown



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and a third route will open in 1989. In Portland, Oreg., a new, \$212 million light-rail system surpassed original ridership projections. Large numbers of people park their cars at suburban stations and ride the train downtown.

The big question is, will car-crazy Americans actually ride the no-frills trolley in large enough numbers? Most of the new lines are appearing in the West, where the automobile is king. If Santa Clara County and Sacramento are any indication, some of the new systems will have a tough marketing job ahead.

Recent local polls indicate almost 60 percent of Sacramento residents favored

building a trolley line. However, in another poll, 45 percent said they probably would not ride it.

About half of the \$176 million Sacramento project opened this month—\$45 million over budget—and the hope is that at least 1 of every 8 downtown commuters will climb aboard. Santa Clara County, in the heart of Silicon Valley, has severe traffic snarls, but some 80 percent of the county’s commuters drive solo to work instead of taking buses. But even before the first fare is collected on the \$419 million Santa Clara system this December, critics are calling projections for 40,000 daily riders by the early 1990s “the golden lie.”

If this looks familiar

Ironically, most cities proudly announcing new trolley lines are really entering second marriages. Pacific Electric’s red-car rails covered the Los Angeles basin like a spider web until the operation succumbed to the freeway culture. Sacramento tore up its trolley tracks in 1947. Parts of Portland’s new system shadow an earlier one.

Some cities never fell out of love with the trolley. New Orleans has lost its streetcar named Desire, but ancient trolleys still rumble down St. Charles Avenue. Pittsburgh is modernizing lines that link its south-end suburbs to downtown. San Francisco restored its famous cable cars and a streetcar system put in service in 1897. Clearly, a nation that loves the automobile still has a place in its heart for an old competitor. ■

by Cindy Skrzycki with Peter Dworkin
in San Francisco

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Light-rail transit systems in U.S.

	Year started	Route miles	Passengers per day
Boston	1897	32.6	70,000
Buffalo	1985	6.4	21,000
Cleveland	1920	13.5	17,500
Los Angeles	1989	40.0	100,000
New Orleans	1893	6.6	21,000
Philadelphia	1892	92.9	127,000
Pittsburgh	1891	22.5	20,000
Portland, Oreg.	1986	15.1	15,000
Sacramento	1987	18.3	21,000
San Diego	1981	20.4	23,000
San Francisco	1897	20.7	133,000
San Jose	1987	20.0	40,000

Note: Figures are for systems of 6 miles or longer as of October, 1986, except for San Diego. Los Angeles, Sacramento and San Jose figures are estimates

USN&WR—Basic data: American Public Transit Assn.