



## ***Free Congress Foundation Commentary***

### ***The Next Conservatism #49: Why the Next Conservatism Should Bring Back Streetcars***

***By Paul M. Weyrich***

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Streetcars? What could conservatism have to do with streetcars? Some of you may be wondering if I have slipped my trolley.

Maybe I have, but wanting to bring electric streetcars back to our cities is no sign of it. In an earlier essay on the next conservatism, number ten in this series, I argued that conservatives should want to bring our cities back. Too many of them have become cold, hard, empty places, devoid of life and unable to perform the important functions cities have in any culture. Well, it turns out that if you want to bring cities back, you also want to bring back streetcars.

A great new book, [Street Smart: Streetcars and Cities in the 21st Century](#), explains why. Streetcars, it seems, are one of the most powerful tools for reviving cities. Several American cities have already brought the streetcars back, with tremendous positive effects on re-development. Kenosha, Wisconsin, brought streetcars back for just \$6.2 million, and the new streetcar line has already brought \$150 million in development, for a return on investment of 2,319%. Portland, Oregon, put in a downtown streetcar loop 4.8 miles long for \$55 million; it generated over three billion dollars in new development. A 1.2 mile extension of the original loop brought in another \$1.35 billion in development.

Why do streetcars bring new development? There are several reasons. First, middle-class people with significant disposable income like riding streetcars. That is not true of buses. Second, streetcars are

"pedestrian facilitators." People who ride through a city on a streetcar tend to get off and on, walking for a while, then riding some more. While they are walking, they go in stores, stop in restaurants for something to eat, maybe see a movie or get tickets for a show. In other words, they spend money downtown. Middle-class pedestrians are the life blood of a city, and streetcars make it easy for them to get around.

Third, from a developer's perspective, a streetcar line is a guarantee of high-quality public transportation that will be there for decades. That is not true of buses; a bus line can be here today, gone tomorrow. The investment in track and overhead wire streetcars require means their routes don't get up and move. Not surprisingly, bus service does little or nothing for development.

Beyond their positive effects on re-development, there is another reason the next conservatism should want to bring back streetcars, and passenger trains for that matter. Thanks to trains, streetcars, and interurbans (which were big, fast streetcars that ran from cities far out into the countryside), travel in America used to be a lot more enjoyable than it is now.

Today, we don't really travel. Instead, we are just packaged and shipped. That is true of air travel, which has become an ordeal, and also of much driving. One interstate highway is much like another, and driving in or around cities often means getting caught in traffic congestion, which everybody hates.

The next conservatism's theme of Retroculture wants to bring back good things from the past that we have lost. Pleasure in travel, in the journey itself, should be one of those good things. Life is too short to make travel into misery, when it can be fun.

Yes, riding streetcars is fun. Our grandparents used to enjoy riding the streetcars. They have a feel to them that is completely different from a bus. You can take my word for it. I have ridden streetcars all over the world. Better, the next time you are in a city that has streetcars, or Light Rail, take a ride. You will see the city in a whole different way. And I think you will enjoy the experience.

A few years ago, I was in Denver with a friend, a United States Senator, who was a strong opponent of rail transit. Denver has a Light Rail system. I asked him if he would take a ride on it with me, and he agreed. About half way through our ride, he turned to me and said, "This is nice."

Our cities, if they are to be living cities, need streetcars. The next conservatism should work to bring the streetcars back, as one of many nice presents the past can offer the future. Resurrecting good things from the past is what conservatism should be about.

***Paul M. Weyrich is Chairman and CEO of the Free Congress Foundation***