

 **Opinion**

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## Streetcar should have a place in Milwaukee

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It's no surprise to discover the subject of race is often at play when public transportation plans are on the table in Milwaukee.

It's only surprising when people actually talk about it in public.

The various proposals for moving people around the metropolitan area over the years often have been cloaked in an undercurrent of concerns about racial attitudes that exist in a community always struggling with those issues.

For some, race — or institutionalized racism — is the main reason there's no type of light rail system linking different communities in southeastern Wisconsin.

The reasoning is that many suburban communities are fearful of too many blacks from the inner city having easy access to public transportation methods that could lead to better jobs and greater mobility for minority families.

So the suburbanites instruct their elected officials to fight any move in that direction. Many white readers may reject that theory as silly, racist or unfounded. But over the years I've had several elected politicians — both black and white — acknowledge that it's true.

Which brings me to the Milwaukee streetcar.

The ambitious Milwaukee streetcar project is a favorite of Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett and other city officials who see it as a positive step into the future for the city and its residents, an exciting feature that will link downtown to the East Side and the lakefront in ways that not only complement the area but also send an encouraging message to visitors, employers and potential new residents.

Barrett and some Common Council members have decided to go full-steam ahead [on the \\$124 million plan](#) even though some oppose the project's cost and overall vision. For the most part, it's been seen as a boon to downtown and the lakefront, which usually doesn't help African-Americans all that much.

So it was a bit of a surprise when aldermen discussing the streetcar project last week started talking about race, with two African-American aldermen taking separate stands in regard to the significance of the project for most black residents.

Ald. Joe Davis described the streetcar plan in stark terms that suggested black residents were being overlooked and even discriminated against by the proposal. For good measure, he even made a connection between ongoing protests and demands for justice for Dontre Hamilton, a black man with mental health issues shot by a Milwaukee police officer.

Davis claimed that his talks with young unemployed blacks in town had brought him to the conclusion that the streetcar project wasn't much of a concern for them and that they were more worried over whether they would feel safe riding a streetcar in downtown Milwaukee near the park where Hamilton was killed.

I think that's a stretch, but do agree that Davis identified the fact that many recent civic projects seem aimed at attracting white millennials to Milwaukee and aren't targeted at a local black youth population in need of good jobs.

Ald. Milele Coggs disputed Davis' suggestion that support for the streetcar meant non-support for urgent matters such as seeking justice in the Hamilton shooting.

"It is not that you care about the community or poverty or police brutality — or you care about the streetcar," said Coggs. "It is not one or the other."

During the discussions on this issue, it's been amusing to listen to some people talk about public transportation from a position of utter ignorance or disinterest; if you've never depended on a bus or a train to get where you need to go, it's easy to believe that nobody really needs it that much.

Milwaukee is a tale of two cities and nowhere is that more apparent than in matters of public transportation. There are vibrant American cities on a similar scale as Milwaukee with much more attractive and welcoming public transportation features, whether it's light rail, streetcars or trolleys that all contribute to the city's image.

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In many of these cities, it's easier to find a way to get to work if you don't have a car than it is in Milwaukee.

In every city, people realize the new shiny stuff built downtown isn't really meant to be enjoyed by everybody, particularly those who can't afford much at all in their daily lives. Most residents are smart enough to realize the truth but have more important stuff to worry about.

Streetcars have their place as long as we pay attention to that other stuff, too.

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