



The streetcar project planned by Mayor Tom Barrett would be a "1900s style trolley."

— *Jim Steineke* on Wednesday, November 19th, 2014 in a tweet

Rep. Jim Steineke says Milwaukee streetcar would be '1900s style trolley'

By *James B. Nelson* on Friday, January 16th, 2015 at 5:00 a.m.

Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett's plan to move ahead with a \$123.9 million downtown streetcar project -- which is approaching an important vote at the Common Council -- has drawn strong reactions from opponents who want to force a citywide vote.

Republicans in Madison have joined the criticism, including Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke, who linked spending on the the streetcar to possible public financing for a new Milwaukee Bucks arena.

"Mayor Barrett, if you have \$120 mil to pay for a 1900's style trolley, you certainly don't need state tax \$ for a #Bucks arena," Steineke, a Kaukauna Republican, said in a [tweet](#).

When we asked Steineke to elaborate beyond 140 characters, he returned to the theme that the streetcars are outdated technology -- akin to the network Milwaukee had for nearly 100 years until the last route ran in the 1950s.

"Back then they were not for the yuppie entertainment around in the downtown parts of the city," Steineke said. "We moved away from fixed-rail streetcars 50 years ago as a country."

He continued: "Obviously there would be more modern cars and electric systems ... but the style of transportation remains consistent."

Of course, Barrett isn't suggesting putting the city's old streetcar system back into service. The mayor supports a \$123.9 million 2.1 mile system, with an 0.4 mile extension to the lake. The Common Council is expected to vote on the proposal Jan. 21, 2015.

"Studies and public statements by Milwaukee developers show that a fixed-rail line will encourage development because of the route's permanence and the transportation alternative it provides," according to an overview of the project prepared by City Engineer Jeff Polenske.

Critics counter that it simply takes development away from other areas that are not on the street car line, and that city residents would be better served by an improved bus system with the flexibility to readily change routes.

So how would the new system compare with the old? Is Steineke right that the project is an outdated form of transportation?

Let's look at three aspects of the modern streetcar proposal and see how they compare with the city's previous system.

Route and service area

Barrett wants a "starter system" based downtown. It would allow for connections to other neighborhoods and -- someday -- destinations far beyond the downtown area such as the Milwaukee Regional Medical Center, Miller Park, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the airport.

The previous system began in 1860 with a small network of horse-drawn cars. Those lines eventually grew into a large network powered by electricity. The streetcar became an important part of the city's fabric -- and the foundation for the city's electric utility.

In terms of routes, it looked more like the current Milwaukee County bus system. In the streetcar's heyday, Milwaukee had a network of 15 to 20 lines that hauled workers to

factories and families to picnics. But ridership declines began in the 1920s as cars became more popular, and after financial troubles the system ceased operation in 1958.

So, in terms of scope, the new plan would be much smaller than the old system. But Barrett does have expansion plans in mind.

Vehicles

Obviously, the new streetcars are ...new, compared with those from the past century. They're air conditioned and quieter, with a "sleek modern look," the city says.

The city also notes that the modern system would include "real time technology" that tells riders when the next car is arriving. In addition, the cars would be fully accessible to the disabled and carry more people than the older cars.

"In general, describing the proposed system as '1900s style' is accurate but disingenuous," said local historian John Gurda, who has written extensively about the old streetcar system. "Yes, the cars would follow fixed routes on steel rails, like their predecessors, but so do passenger trains. In both cases, the rolling stock of today is markedly different from what our ancestors knew."

So, Steineke's claim is accurate in terms of using fixed rails, but what would run on them would be much different than your grandparents' streetcar.

Old technology vs. new popularity

Around the country, there's a streetcar renaissance of sorts underway. Systems operate in at least seven U.S. cities and the [Washington Post reported Nov. 30, 2014](#) that six systems are under construction, with two others -- Milwaukee and Fort Lauderdale, Fla. -- in the planning stages.

(Not included in that list is Kenosha, the only Wisconsin city with streetcars. That city's two-mile loop features vintage cars on rails and is aimed at tourists, with links to museums, the downtown and harbor.)

Plans to build new streetcar systems have run into opposition in some areas, including Washington, D.C., where the system has been [scaled back from 37 miles to about eight](#).

The Post noted concerns that "[streetcars can gum up, and get caught in, already busy traffic lanes](#). In nearby Arlington, Va., public skepticism of the high cost and uncertain benefit of a streetcar line caused officials to cancel an entire project" in [November 2014](#).

On the other hand, the system in Portland has expanded five times and now covers eight miles, and Seattle is adding a second route and planning a third.

On this point, Steineke is perhaps the most off. There has been a recent burst of streetcar systems, which suggests they are returning in popularity -- not consigned to the history books.

Our rating

Steineke criticized plans for a new Milwaukee streetcar system, saying the project was a "1900s style trolley."

His Twitter followers may not be following the project closely, but Steineke certainly knows Barrett isn't planning a nostalgic system with old-time or refurbished cars.

The city sees the streetcar as a modern transportation system, a building block that could lead to future economic growth. In theory, it's a catalyst rather than a throwback. And at least some other cities see streetcars in the same light.

We rate Steineke's claim Half True.



A D V E R T I S E M E N T

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[The Milwaukee Streetcar.com](#)

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