

From the Milwaukee Business Journal:

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Streetcar extension to arena will be different – no wires, dedicated lanes

May 11, 2016, 2:49pm CDT **Updated: May 11, 2016, 3:36pm CDT**

The Milwaukee streetcar's extension along Fourth Street to a new arena will be different from most of its other sections — there will be no overhead wires, and the transit vehicles will ride in dedicated street lanes.

Those details about the 1.2-mile extension were outlined Wednesday when Milwaukee Public Works commissioner Ghassan Korban spoke to a Common Council committee. The city is seeking a federal grant to pay for the \$40 million line and, if successful in raising the money, could open the line for service in spring or summer 2020.



The extension would run the streetcar north and south on Fourth or Fifth streets downtown.

Plans call for the line to run between St. Paul and Highland Avenue, mostly along Fourth Street. It would link the future downtown arena, convention center and The Shops of Grand Avenue to the rest of the downtown streetcar system.

Unlike the initial downtown loop east of the river, streetcars on Fourth Street would run in dedicated lanes without mingling with cars. Tracks could run in the existing street median on Fourth between State Street and Highland Avenue, Korban said. In other sections, it could run along the curb line in what are now parking lanes.

Streetcars will share lanes with other drivers for most of the initial downtown route that will start construction this year. For that phase, a dedicated streetcar lane is envisioned in the median for a short stretch at Kilbourn Avenue near Cathedral Square.

The dedicated lanes are possible, and preferable, on Fourth Street partially because the streetcar will not have overhead power lines, Korban said. They instead would run on batteries. Eliminating the overhead wires reduces the amount of private underground utilities that must be moved for the track to avoid, for example, stray current, he said.

The city also unveiled the potential locations for three stations on the route. That includes a stop in a street median by the future arena at Fourth Street and Highland Avenue. Another stop is planned at Fourth and Kilbourn Avenue.

There could be a significant station at Wisconsin Avenue between Fourth and Fifth streets, where the city owns a parking lot. Developers have reached out to the city with interest in that site, but no formal plans have come forward.

Korban said a station on Wisconsin Avenue could be in the street right-of-way like the others, or it could

be incorporated into a new development. It could be in an outdoor plaza, or an interior station similar to the one envisioned for the streetcar in the Couture project at the lakefront.

“It would be preferable to interface that section with a development,” Korban said. “We think it’s a good starting point. It’s an enticement to the development world.”

Wisconsin Avenue is a key junction on the route. Streetcars would run north and south on Fourth Street north of Wisconsin Avenue. However, the line would split at Wisconsin Avenue. At that point, northbound streetcars would run on Fifth Street, past the Hilton Milwaukee City Center. South-bound cars would remain on Fourth Street.

The Fourth Street extension will cost \$40 million, Korban said. The federal grant would cover half, and aldermen in summer or fall will be asked to cover the rest through tax incremental financing districts. Those districts would pay for the streetcar using property taxes generated by new developments along the route. A new district could be created around whatever project comes along for the city parking lot at Fourth and Wisconsin Avenue.

“Obviously not taken for granted, but that is a conversation that will have to be had,” Korban said of the TIF talks.

Korban said the Fourth Street route was chosen partially because it gets the streetcar closer to Bronzeville, a neighborhood along North Avenue north of downtown. Studies are underway to decide where the streetcar will go next, he said.

“This would put us 1.2 miles closer to Bronzeville than otherwise,” Korban said. “Certainly we are keeping an eye on Walker’s Point as a definite consideration in the near future.”

A line running through the 3rd Ward to Walker's Point south of downtown has emerged as one of the

“most crucial” lines to make the streetcar more efficient, Korban said. The Walker’s Point neighborhood is buzzing with development right now, with developers securing vacant buildings and moving forward with several apartment projects.

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