

# MAKING TRACKS

Vol. 6, No. 2

Newsletter of the Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition

Spring 2000

## What Nieuw Amsterdam Could Learn From Old Amsterdam

By Professor John Pucher

On a recent trip to Amsterdam, I was overwhelmed by the extent and quality of that city's trolley network, which reaches into virtually every corner of the urban area and provides service at least every ten minutes. Although I was living in an apartment about five miles from the city center, three different tram lines had stops right at my doorstep, and I never had to wait more than a few minutes for the next tram downtown. In the other direction, it was only a 7-minute trolley ride from my corner to the RAI train station, which has direct train service (every 15 minutes) to the Schiphol International Airport.

Not only is the tram service in Amsterdam extensive and frequent, but it is very attractive, both for passengers and for everyone else as well. In contrast to the many older trolley systems I have ridden in Eastern Europe, the Amsterdam trams are exceedingly quiet, so that one barely notices when they pass by. In outlying residential neighborhoods, any noise from the friction of wheels on the tracks is further reduced by very slightly depressing the tracks and planting grass between and beside the tracks themselves. From my bedroom window, I had a view of three tram lines, and there wasn't a screech to be heard in the entire week I was there, except from an automobile that had almost run into a bicyclist on the parallel street. Indeed, the gentle humming of the trams passing by my window was the most pleasant bedtime music I have enjoyed, putting me to sleep in no time at all.

Although all the tram lines I saw in Amsterdam drew their power from overhead electric lines, they did not represent a visual blight at all. Indeed, unless you are specifically looking for them, you barely even notice them. Moreover, in residential areas, the trees lining most streets practically made the overhead power lines invisible. No one I talked to found them a problem at all and felt that they were well worth the price for the superb transport services provided by the Amsterdam tram system.

In more densely built-up parts of Amsterdam, trams manage to weave their way through even the narrowest of passageways, along

(Continued on page 3)

## Community Board Approves Plan for 8<sup>th</sup> St. Sidewalk Widening

By George Haikalis

Despite two stormy meetings, Manhattan Community Board Two overwhelmingly approved detailed plans for widening 8<sup>th</sup> Street's sidewalks on June 22, 2000. Objections came from nearby residents who feared that the pedestrian amenity would turn 8<sup>th</sup> Street into a carnival midway. VCTC commends the energy and perseverance of Honi Klein, Executive Director of the Alliance BID, for strengthening the resolve of the board to override these objections.

The sidewalks were narrowed in the 1920s to make way for more automobiles in the village. This worked only too well. Cars have flooded the village and all of New York City, creating the noise, congestion, pollution and accidents that diminishes the livability of the densest city in the U.S.

VCTC supports the sidewalk widening as a modest first step in the important direction of completely eliminating motor vehicular traffic on 8<sup>th</sup> St. (and Christopher Street and St. Marks Place). When combined with a modern light rail line, a pedestrian-only 8<sup>th</sup> Street would be transformed into an attractive place for residents and visitors.

While it may be too late to change the detailed 8<sup>th</sup> Street plan developed by engineering consultant Daniel Frankfort, VCTC is compelled to point out one short-

coming. The plan does not propose widening sidewalks at bus stops. Instead, at these locations where passengers gather to wait for buses, sidewalks will remain at their current unacceptably narrow width. This is inconsistent with modern traffic calming practices well established in Europe, where sidewalks are extended into the street at bus stops. By halting buses in the traffic stream, rather than pulling them to the side, the right message is given—public transit use is to be encouraged and car traffic calmed. Even with this shortcoming, VCTC urges that the plan proceed with all deliberate speed.

Until our community stops pandering to motorists at the expense of pedestrians and public transit users, we will never attain the livability and ambience of competing cities. As tourism be-

(Continued on page 4)



*Just imagine modern light rail vehicles gliding past Times Square in the middle of an auto-free 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. This photomontage, created by architect-author Roxanne Warren, is part of a campaign to breathe new life into the long-stalled 42<sup>nd</sup> Street LRT project. Advancing this new proposal, which we feature in the centerfold of this issue of MAKING TRACKS, will be a major boost to VCTC's effort to achieve a similar crosstown light rail line on a pedestrianized Christopher St., 8<sup>th</sup> St. and St. Marks Place.*

On the Back: Remembering Light Rail Advocates

## Auto-Free Light Rail Boulevard for 42nd Street

By Roxanne Warren and George Haikalis

### The Proposal

By incorporating substantial pedestrian amenities into its long-stalled plan for a crosstown light rail line on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, New York City can finally make this transportation improvement reality. The most recent proposal, advanced by the NYC Department of Transportation and approved by the City in 1994, called for converting the southern half of the street into a transitway. Westbound traffic would continue to use the northern half of the street. That proposal failed to gain public support in part because it provided virtually no improvement in the walking environment on the crowded sidewalks of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street—among the busiest in the nation. New developments that are planned or under construction will further increase crowding on these sidewalks. By eliminating traffic in both directions, and creating an auto-free light rail boulevard on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, the walking experience can be dramatically improved, while light rail will greatly improve surface transportation service. This is a potential winning combination that, not surprisingly, has become the norm in progressive cities around the world.

### Current and Projected Conditions

On 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, with its major transportation terminals and interchanges and its rich assortment of cultural, educational, governmental, commercial, and tourist attractions, there are typically some five times as many pedestrians as motor vehicles. While 55 to 60 percent of the street space is allocated to motor vehicles, there is insufficient space to walk freely at peak times along any portions of the street. Yet despite this disproportionate space allocation, crosstown traffic often moves even more slowly than walking speed. Now, newly constructed and planned office buildings, entertainment facilities, and apartment towers are generating even greater increases in the demand for pedestrian space.

### Precedents and their Components

Downtown auto-free streets, particularly where these have been furnished with rail transit and a high quality of pedestrian amenities, have proven unexpectedly popular and economically profitable in cities all over the world, and most notably on high-end shopping streets in Europe, where transit usage and walking habits are quite closely matched by ours in Manhattan. The quality of design and maintenance is crucial; while not all efforts to establish these streets have been successful, failures have generally been attributed to either an insufficiently dense population of potential patrons, indifferent design and maintenance, poor publicity, and/or

insufficient or incompatible public transit within the zone. For 42<sup>nd</sup> Street the requirements of sufficient population, and conditions with longer-distance public transit networks are already met, while the quality of design and maintenance would need to be actively addressed.

### Configuration and Traffic Diversion

Eliminating the cars in both directions on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street will allow the light rail vehicles to flow more freely than they have in the earlier plan. The same methodology that was applied in the 1994 FEIS analysis to the diversion of eastbound traffic can be easily applied to westbound traffic. The problem is symmetrical, and the diversions are not competing for the same space. Additionally, locating the transitway in the middle of the street, where trolleys once ran, should substantially reduce the problems of conflict with utilities that were cited in the FEIS. Curbs can be eliminated, and the streets filled up to sidewalk levels, reducing tripping hazards, and allowing space for cafes and other amenities.

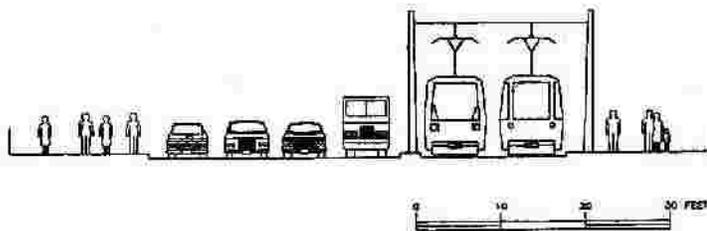
### Merchants' Deliveries

Entry into the street of emergency vehicles and the controlled delivery of goods and refuse removal can be handled much as they are within other auto-free streets and pedestrian precincts, such as Grand Central Terminal, Rockefeller Center, the World Trade Center, and the South Street Seaport. For most of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street's large office buildings, freight entrances are located on 41<sup>st</sup> or 43<sup>rd</sup> Street, since ground floor rents on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street are too high for this function. For handcartable deliveries, nearby truck parking spaces on adjacent avenues need to be carefully reserved. For more substantial deliveries, trucks can be allowed entry at controlled times.

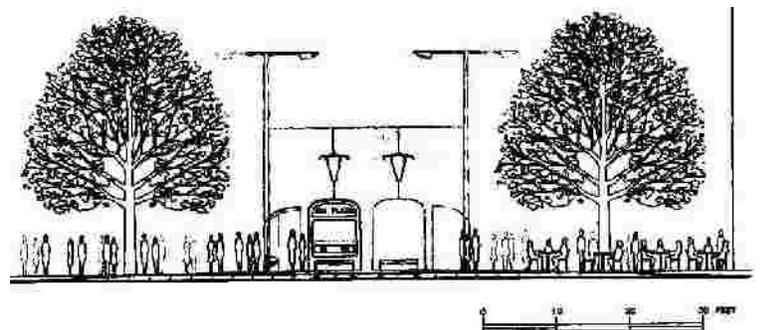
### Transit Issues

A major advantage of light rail over buses is that, because it is clean, quiet, and predictably channeled by its tracks, it does not violate the safe and relaxed atmosphere of the pedestrian street. Modern light rail transit is the updated version of trolley technology, which has been re-engineered, with low floors, to meet contemporary needs for accessibility by seniors, parents with children, and persons in wheel-chairs, while permitting reduced boarding times, higher capacity, and improved performance. Its longer cycles, relative to buses, allow substantially lower operating costs due to greater driver productivity. Located at-grade, the light rail system's easy boarding and inexpensive station platforms will allow very frequent access points (i.e., at every typical block along 42<sup>nd</sup> Street), making it an ideal collector/distributor for the north/south subways and buses. A crosstown light rail line on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street will extend the reach of the subways, serving massive new developments planned on the East and Hudson Rivers, as well as important tourist generators on the waterfronts, such as the UN Headquarters, Central Park

(Continued on page 3)



*42<sup>nd</sup> Street light rail line as approved in 1994—Typical cross section looking east. Eastbound traffic was to be diverted to other streets, and the light rail right-of-way located on the east side of the street. Westbound traffic was to remain; between this traffic and the light rail there would be 11-foot wide platforms for transit stations, alternating with taxi and goods loading/unloading bays.*



*Auto-free Light Rail Boulevard for 42<sup>nd</sup> street—Typical cross section. Eliminating sidewalk curbs will allow space for cafes in front of the shops. The street surface can be sloped up and configured to form station platforms.*

(Continued from page 2)

Line and Port Imperial Piers, and the Javits Convention Center.

**Funding Issues**

A project of this civic importance can draw private, as well as public funds. The original NYC DOT proposal called for the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Light Rail line itself to be supported entirely by farebox revenues. This is now unrealistic with the MTA's successful MetroCard program, which eliminates the double fare when transferring from subway to bus. While low operating costs on the line will still yield a surplus, some public funds will nevertheless be necessary to offset the cost of the light rail capital investment. With respect to public funds, it is important to consider the as an integral part of the city's transportation system, every bit as vital as the Second Avenue subway and the LIRR access to Grand Central, and in fact complementary to these two projects. Given its far lower cost and substantial user base, the project should compete well for federal and local transportation funds.

An auto-free light rail boulevard on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street should be of a quality comparable to those in Rome, Vienna, Paris, Lisbon, and Zürich, attaining at least a degree of the ambience that we see on the best pedestrian streets of Europe. For the highest quality of design and maintenance, the public amenities would probably need to be underwritten with supplemental private funds, as public funds and agency standards would in all likelihood be insufficient for achieving a sufficient quality of excellence. Some private funds can come from nearby property owners, who stand to gain appreciably from the amenity created. The opportunity can also be afforded to individuals and foundations to contribute toward urban design.

**Potential for Future Extensions of the System**

Successful conversion of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street into an auto-free light rail boulevard could ignite public interest in further extensions of the system to the north and south. Similarly, the city could consider an ultimate extension passing through the Lincoln Tunnel to connect with the new Hudson-Bergen light rail line.

**Further Steps**

The first requirement is an effective outreach to the to illuminate the possibilities for a more civilized, more fluidly functioning urban environment, and to develop a consensus intentions for this very central street. If and when a basic consensus is reached that 42<sup>nd</sup> Street should be dedicated to an auto-free light rail boulevard, a further systematic evaluation, including design standards and preliminary cost estimates, will need to be developed. While it should build upon all of the pertinent findings contained in the previous studies performed under the DOT, this effort will funding to bring the proposal to a point at which it can be advanced toward implementation by the appropriate city agency.

**Coalition for Auto-Free Light Rail Boulevard for 42<sup>nd</sup> St.**

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*"Nieuw Amsterdam" (Continued from page 1)*

and over canals, through auto-free zones, to every corner of the city. Businesses appear to thrive everywhere the trams run, e they provide superb levels of accessibility for their customers. Most impressive, however, was the incredible lively streetscape and cityscape the trams create as they glide noiselessly and cleanly through Amsterdam. Although Amsterdam does have a limited subway system (Sneltram) as well, most Amsterdamers prefer the surface trams, since they avoid having to go up and down steps to subway stations and provide an infinitely superior view for passengers to enjoy during their travel.

New York (Nieuw Amsterdam) could learn a lot from Old Amsterdam, especially when it comes to the advantages of streetcars over virtually any other mode of transportation. One can hardly imagine a more civilized way to get around a city! Can anyone doubt the immense appeal trolleys would have in many of New York City's neighborhoods such as Greenwich Village? Not only would trolleys reduce the congestion, noise, accidents, and air pollution on our streets, but they would provide a pleasant, really attractive, and enjoyable way of getting around. If anyone in New York doubts the advantages of streetcars, I suggest they spend a week in Amsterdam. They will come back as enthusiastic about trolleys as I am. Q

*John Pucher is a professor in the Department of Urban Planning at Rutgers University*

**Trolley Slide Show Available**

VCTC would be happy to present a slide show to any organization about trolleys in general as well as our proposal for a crosstown light rail transit line through the Village. Please call George Halkalis at 212-475-3394 for more information.

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**Remembering Light Rail Advocates  
Gordon J. Thompson and Richard P. Duffy**

This year New York lost two prolific proponents of light rail transit. Both published widely read newsletters calling for new light rail lines in their communities. Gordon J. Thompson, 70, passed away on February 1, 2000. He was a transit professional who designed the Buffalo light rail system. After his retirement he helped found the Citizens Regional Transit Corp. and edited a newsletter calling for extensions to the Buffalo system. Thompson also served as a consultant on the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street light rail project and most recently was a major contributor to the design of the surprisingly successful Salt Lake City TRAX light rail system. Thompson was a geographer and urban planner by training and produced excellent detailed maps of his rail proposals. He was an expert on rail systems throughout the world, traveled extensively and published detailed descriptions of the many systems he had visited.

Richard Duffy, 68, was a longtime proponent of light rail in Westchester County. He passed away on August 9, 2000. Duffy published nearly 150 issues of a monthly I-287 Light Rail Newsletter, calling for construction of a light rail line extending from Suffern, in Rockland County across the Tappan Zee Bridge to Portchester, in Westchester County. His campaign raised interest in alternatives to highway widening in this busy corridor and ultimately led to the demise of the Cross-Westchester HOV project. Duffy was also active in the Empire State Passenger Association, an advocacy group for intercity rail passenger service, and served as its West-

“Sidewalk Widening“ (Continued from page 1)

comes an even more important part of the New York economy, the crosstown corridor must be transformed into a showcase environment for residents and visitors. 8<sup>th</sup> Street is not a suburban mall for drive-by shoppers, but a unique destination drawing tourists from around the world. Like the overwhelming majority of residents who patronize businesses on 8<sup>th</sup> Street, tourists arrive on foot or by public transit. Our proposed crosstown trolley, in a pedestrianized street, remains the preferred solution to 8<sup>th</sup> Street's mobility ills. We will continue to make the case for this transformation, even as we commend Community Board Two for its decision to advance the sidewalk widening. Q

chester Coordinator. After a career in television production, Duffy went on to a second career with Equitable Life. But his passion was light rail transit.

Both advocates were very supportive of our Village Crosstown Trolley proposal. They will be missed.

- GH

Dear Reader,

Sometimes it takes a fresh look at an old idea to see how well it works. As Prof. John Pucher reports, Amsterdam is proof that streetcars improve the quality of life in a city—and could do so even in “Nieuw” Amsterdam. And sometimes it takes perseverance to make an idea work, as is the case with Honi Klein of the Village Alliance BID who has moved the 8<sup>th</sup> street sidewalk widening project forward despite strong opposition. What would streetcars be like in Manhattan? Take a look at our centerfold story, Auto-Free Light Rail Boulevard for 42nd Street, and let us know what you think.

**Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition**

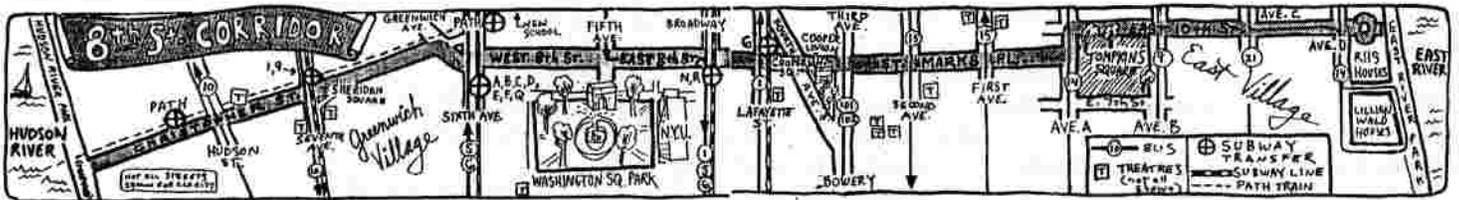
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*MAKING TRACKS*

Editor - Michael Goodman                      Map Illustration - Wayne Fields

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The Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition (VCTC) has been organized by a group of neighborhood residents to develop plans and community support for a river-to-river light-rail trolley line linking the East Village, West Village and Greenwich Village.



**VCTC**

**Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition**

*Making tracks through the Village*

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