

MAKING TRACKS

Vol. 9, No. 2

Newsletter of the Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition

Fall 2004

Voters Support Light Rail Transit Nationwide: While the City Sleeps

By George Haikalis

While blue state voters may be licking their wounds this past November, advocates for better public transit, nationwide, can glow in their victories. Voters approved 24 of 31 initiatives that were on the ballot to fund rail transit extensions. For all of 2004 some 80% of all measures that would increase taxes to pay for rail transit passed. Most of these votes were for surface light rail transit—the affordable alternative to budget-busting new subway construction.

Yet there are no light rail proposals under consideration for NYC. The Mayor and the Governor and most elected officials support extraordinarily expensive new projects—like the Second Avenue Subway, the #7 subway extension and a new LIRR rail tunnel between Downtown Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan. Now with the bubble bursting on its artificial funding mechanism of "revenue bonds", MTA faces a long term shortfall just to pay for day to day operations, let alone needed capital investments to renew the existing system. Funding for the new subways may have to take the back seat.

MTA Revenue Bonds - a High Stakes Poker Game

New York State's constitution provides a very clear cut mechanism for going into debt—voters can make the choice at the ballot box to support statewide bond issues. MTA's transit system, like those throughout the U.S., cannot be supported entirely by fares paid by riders. Through the years an assortment of taxes and fees have been cobbled together to cover MTA's deficits. The Cuomo Administration cracked open the door for fare-backed bonds by arguing that if state and local governments did not come through with subsidies, the MTA could always raise fares to pay back the bonds. The ante for this high stakes poker game was raised considerably by the Pataki Administration and the state legislature. Now the game is over, and even though there are enough resources to cover the MTA operating budget for 2005 without raising the fares, future years look very bleak indeed.

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CATS and LRT: A Grand Combination

By William K. Guild

Five years ago, VCTC published a proposal for restoration of the Grand Street Trolley, a crosstown LRT and pedestrian sanctuary on the northern edge of the chronically gridlocked Canal Street corridor (*Making Tracks*, Summer 1999). A key goal of the proposal was to provide a viable transit link between the Lower East Side and the many north-south subway and surface transit lines intersecting Grand Street, as well as fast, reliable transportation to Chinatown, Little Italy and SOHO.

The following year, the NYC Department of Transportation proposed a multi-agency, multi-modal planning process to address both regional and local transportation problems in the corridor. CATS, the federally funded Canal Area Transportation Study which emerged from that proposal, now involves more than a dozen state and local government agencies, together with numerous community and private sector groups, as active participants. Study recommendations to date include both pedestrian amenities and measures to encourage transit use in the area.

The study area, as shown in the map on page 2, extends approximately from Houston Street on the north to Chambers Street on the south, and from river to river.

Canal Street, near the center of this swathe, links the Holland Tunnel and Manhattan Bridge, two major sources of the truck and other vehicular traffic clogging lower Manhattan. The Williamsburg Bridge also lands in the study area, at Delancey Street, feeding vehicles into the Holland tunnel via Kenmare, Broome and Watts Streets. While the bizarre toll system now in place at New York's bridges and tunnels is beyond the scope of this article, its effect is greatly to increase westbound vehicular traffic through the CATS area in general, rendering Canal and Broome Streets especially difficult and dangerous for pedestrians.

CATS and People

Between Broome and Canal Streets, virtually bisecting the CATS study area, Grand Street runs from Varick Street, barely four blocks from the Hudson, to FDR Drive and East River Park, two

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Red on Blue. Red State Texas's new light rail line on an auto-free Main Street in Downtown Houston looks very much at home when superimposed on Blue State New York's car-clogged 42nd Street. Illustration by architect Maria Theresa Facchinetti. This image and many others are available on vision42's newly enhanced website: www.vision42.org. Take a look!

On the Back: Letter from the Editor, Astor Place Festival



CATS map showing Grand Street light rail line. Western segment parallels Canal Street, providing haven for pedestrians and transfers to all major subway lines for riders from transit-starved lower east side. More than half of route lies east of Grand Street F line station, site of future 2nd Avenue subway connection should that 75-year-old dream ever be realized. Loops at ends of route provide direct access to subway stations and to East River Park, and will permit greater operating efficiency.

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miles across town. Vehicular traffic is relatively light and mainly local, predominantly delivery vans and small trucks. A Grand Street light rail line could hold the key to resolving both transit and pedestrian issues in the CATS study area. It would also provide effective transit access to the long-neglected Lower East Side much sooner and far more economically than subways not currently on anyone's drawing board.

As noted here in 1999, a major objective of the great subway building boom in the early 20th Century was to disburse the masses of residents on the Lower East Side, then the most densely populated area on the face of the Earth. While this was achieved, with upper Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and eventually, Queens becoming bedroom communities for hundreds of thousands employed in the downtown and midtown business districts, the Lower East Side itself was bypassed. In addition to a four-track Second Avenue subway, Phase II of the IND system, proposed in 1929, was to include tunnels to the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn via both Houston Street and East Broadway, with several stations on the Lower East Side. The only element of this plan even being considered today is a two-track Second Avenue subway, with a station below the existing Grand Street F line stop at Chrystie Street. The area was indeed better served in the age of elevated and street rail-ways.

Like virtually all new light rail lines, the Grand Street route would run in "dedicated" right of way, with some street segments toward the western end barred to trucks and automobiles other than emergency vehicles. This would provide an oasis for pedestrians seeking to avoid the dangerously crowded sidewalks of Canal Street, a block or two to the south. As demonstrated in scores of cities in this country and abroad, light rail and pedestrian traffic are both compatible and complimentary. Eliminating cars and trucks

on Grand Street, particularly the very narrow segment west of Broadway, would substantially increase space for pedestrians, a boon to retail businesses along the route, as well as to walkers and transit users.

The Grand Street Light Rail Route

VCTC's original Grand Street proposal called for a double track light rail line from Duarte Square, just west of Sixth Avenue on the north side of Canal Street, running the length of Grand Street to a terminal at FDR Drive near Corlear's Hook, the easternmost point of Manhattan. It would follow most of the route of an earlier river-to-river streetcar line, which was converted to buses in 1932 and abandoned altogether in 1988, following the all-too-typical downward spiral of service cuts and ridership losses.

One CATS transit improvement, the opening of an entrance to the IND Canal Street (A, C and E) station at the north-east corner of Canal and Thompson Streets, has already been implemented. With this change in place, the alignment might be improved by a loop at Duarte Square. Westbound vehicles would turn down Thompson Street to stop at the newly opened IND entrance and then make a right turn to cross the square parallel to Canal Street, making a second stop near the north-west corner, a few steps from the West Side IRT (1 and 9) station. Vehicles would then proceed north, along a little-used remnant of Sullivan Street on the west side of the square before turning right again for the eastbound run across Grand Street.

A similar modification might be considered at the eastern end of Grand Street, with the track looping through Cherry and Jackson Streets after a stop at the pedestrian bridge across the FDR Drive into East River Park (see map). Currently both M-14A and M-22 buses turn at this loop before meandering back to Chelsea Piers and Battery Park City via 14th Street and Chambers Street, respectively. These loops, which might include sidings for off-peak LRV

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storage, would provide more convenient stations for riders, while speeding crosstown service by making it unnecessary for operators to change ends before starting return trips.

Between Broadway and Centre Street, Grand Street intersects several subway lines, making transfers possible between light rail and the J, M, N, R, W and 6 lines. Entrances to this complex of four subway stations currently are located at or near Canal Street, two blocks south of Grand Street, but some platforms extend well to the north and new MetroCard access could be provided much closer to the light rail route. Such entrances to the Broadway BMT did in fact exist and could be reopened.

At Chrystie Street the light rail line would stop directly over the Grand Street subway station, currently the first stop in Manhattan on the B and D lines and, eventually, an important station on the Second Avenue subway when that line is extended to lower Manhattan. Further east, at Essex Street, the route crosses over the F line, midway between its East Broadway and Delancey Street stops. J, M and Z trains are also available at the latter station, two blocks north of Grand Street.

In SOHO, at its western end, Grand Street is quite narrow, best suited for use as a pedestrian and transit corridor to relieve the congestion of Canal Street and the CATS study area in general. The street widens somewhat east of Broadway, where limited use by motor vehicles might be feasible on some blocks in Little Italy, Chinatown and the famous retail district of the Lower East Side around Orchard Street. East of Essex Street, Grand Street has been widened into a broad boulevard passing between high rise apartment houses and other modern buildings. This kilometer-long segment could easily accommodate both motor vehicles and LRVs, the latter operating in "dedicated" right of way.

Manhattan is long and narrow, with its widest band—about 2½ miles—from 14th Street south to Corlear's Hook, in the CATS study area. 14th Street has a crosstown bus line and even a subway, at least between First and Eighth Avenues, but crosstown transit to the south is inadequate or non-existent. VCTC has been working for nearly a decade to correct this state of affairs by restoring light rail transit in the Eighth Street corridor. A Grand Street light rail line would go a long way toward resolving the seemingly intractable pedestrian and transit issues in the CATS study area, relieving congestion along Canal Street and providing efficient transit to the thousands of residents to the east for the first time in generations. □

For more information on the CATS project, go to www.nymtc.org. East River Park, including Corlear's Hook Park, was the subject of an article in **Making Tracks** (Fall 1997).

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Light Rail Transit to the Rescue

Even to keep the existing system physically intact, and to avoid catastrophic service cuts and fare hikes that would drive riders away, new tax revenues must be put into place. However, to pay for the grandiose dreams of the Mayor, the Governor and many elected officials an even greater tax stream will be needed. This is where light rail transit comes in. At a per mile cost that is one tenth the cost of new subway construction, light rail transit is an affordable alternative. It will allow some significant expansion to be packaged with a new MTA funding plan.

The Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition has been campaigning for light rail transit for this past decade. Particularly in Manhattan, light rail can be combined with pedestrian improvements to produce a more city-affirming urban environment. New York City's once extensive street railway network—the world's largest—was scrapped over a period of twenty years to make way for cars and trucks. This effort was dizzyingly "successful", flooding the streets of New York with a sea of horn-honking, polluting motor vehicles that actually carry far fewer persons than the streetcars they replaced. But is this the kind of city we want? VCTC thinks that fewer cars, better public transit and enhanced walking space are really what make a city great.

This brings us back to the November ballot initiatives. Voters in car-dominated cities like Denver and Phoenix realized that they needed an alternative and supported light rail transit. Even smaller cities like Tacoma, Washington and Racine, Wisconsin installed short street railway lines in their city centers. And the day before election day, Little Rock, Arkansas opened a 2.1 mile line linking its downtown with its sister city across the river. Our Village Crosstown Trolley line would be about the same length as these recent new starts. With perhaps ten times the population density in the corridor, and with stores lining most of the route, the Village Crosstown Trolley would be a smashing success.

New York City's elected officials' embrace of the auto is having a catastrophic effect on the city's environment and its economy. Perhaps now with its imminent financial crisis, MTA will stumble across light rail transit as an affordable alternative to costly new subways. And while VCTC may not be able to spring for some costly junkets to Tacoma or Little Rock, we would be happy to provide any elected official or business leader with a guided tour of NJ Transit's ever-expanding Hudson-Bergen Line. One need only gaze across the growing forest of high rise towers on New Jersey's waterfront to see that light rail transit is helping our neighboring state eat our lunch. □

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VCTC
 P.O. Box 409
 Village Station
 New York, NY 10014

(212) 475-3394 (voice)
 (212) 475-5051 (fax)
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MTA Threatens M8 and other local bus service with new Bus Service Guidelines

In December, most attention was focused on the MTA's proposed fare hikes and token booth closings. A little-discussed measure approved by the MTA Board, without any opposition from Mayor Bloomberg's four appointees, could lead to the drastic curtailment of most local bus service in NYC. The new guidelines call for "standing room only" loads during midday hours. In the case of the M8 Eighth Street Crosstown line, these guidelines would mean a significant cutback in service, which would in turn lead to an even more dramatic loss in ridership. This tail spin would ultimately lead to the complete demise of service. VCTC urges our readers to call the Mayor at 311 and ask him to reverse his position on these guidelines.

Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition
is proud to sponsor the

Astor Place Festival

Tentatively scheduled for Saturday, May 14, 2005, 10am to 6pm
Astor Place between Broadway and Lafayette St. in
Greenwich Village, NYC

For more information please call 212-475-3394.

The Tracks of New York - No. 1
Metropolitan Street Railway - 1907

Originally published by the Electric Railroaders' Association in 1973, this splendid volume includes six full pages of track plans showing Manhattan's streetcar network in 1907, carhouse and yard plans, a description of each of the forty-seven routes then in operation, a brief history of the system and numerous photographs. A must for anyone interested in the history of the city or in light rail, past or future. Copies are available to our readers for a limited time only at \$6.50, postpaid. Send check or money order payable to VCTC, PO Box 409, New York, NY 10014.

Dear Reader,

Our cover stories in this issue discuss light rail interest across the nation and a proposal for our city in lower Manhattan. Nationwide, 24 of 31 initiatives that were on the ballot to fund rail transit extensions were approved, most for surface light rail transit. In New York City, there are no official light rail proposals under consideration. Restoring the Grand Street Trolley, as part of CATS (Canal Area Transportation Study), could go a long way towards improving transit in this part of Manhattan.

VCTC is on the move—on the internet. We now have a new website address, www.villagetrolley.org, and we invite you to let us know what kind of information you'd like to see there. Please take a look and contact us today. We look forward to hearing from you!

Michael Goodman, *Editor*

Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition

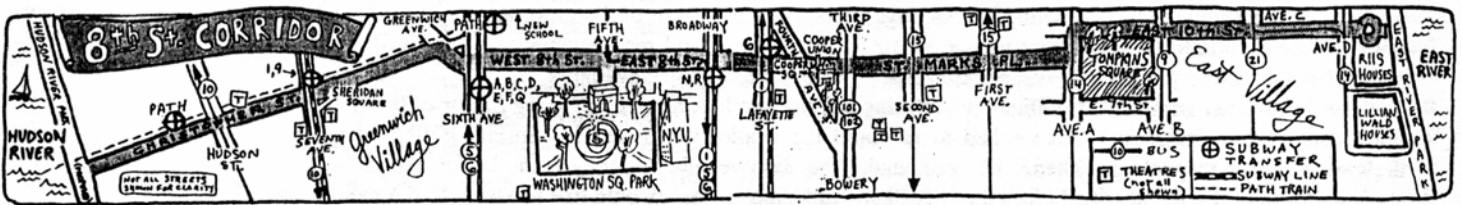
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MAKING TRACKS

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.



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Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition

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