



## The Modern Streetcar—A “Game Changer” for Tucson by Jim Glock • published in the March 2010 issue

**O**n February 18, 2010, the Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood presented the Tucson modern streetcar project with a \$63 million check in TIGER stimulus funding, a program administered by the U.S. Department of Transportation. With this funding in place, the project team can finalize streetcar vehicle procurement, solicit bids for all needed rail and track work, and begin construction.

The modern streetcar will offer Tucson tangible benefits—create an estimated 4,330 permanent and short term jobs; trigger new public/private investment and transit-oriented development; connect The University of Arizona, Downtown Tucson, Arizona Health Sciences Center, Main Gate, 4th Avenue, and Mercado District; and improve transit service in the corridor, adding much needed service frequency, hours and capacity.

The modern streetcar is vital to economic development and will provide a new transit option in our region’s highest density corridor. It is estimated that approximately 10 percent of the region’s population either lives or works within a quarter mile of the modern streetcar line.



**L to R: US Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood & Mayor Bob Walkup holding the \$63 million TIGER Grant ceremonial check**

### How the Project Evolved

The Modern Streetcar project was started in 2004 when the Tucson Department of Transportation initiated a federally-sponsored study to identify transit solutions in central Tucson. About the same time the Technical Advisory Committee and the Community Liaison Group were formed. The Community Liaison Group includes 35 representatives from groups and stakeholders located within the project area; their role is to communicate project information to their groups and to offer feedback on the route, stop design, vehicle design and public art.

A major step in Alternatives Analysis study was to identify the appropriate transit technology—modern streetcar, historic trolley, rapid bus circulator—and alignment that met the study’s purpose and need. The City of Tucson submitted the Alternatives Analysis to the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) for acceptance in May 2006. After more than a year of research and collaboration with residents, businesses and experienced consultants, the Modern Streetcar, operating on a defined alignment, was unanimously approved as the locally preferred alternative by the Community Liaison Group and Technical Advisory Committee, as well as Tucson’s Mayor and Council in January 2006 and March 2007. In May 2006, Pima County voters approved the modern streetcar and local funding as part of the Regional Transportation Authority Plan.

## Why Modern Streetcar Instead of Buses

The modern streetcar was selected as the preferred transit technology because it provided the highest ridership potential, largest passenger capacity, is the most passenger-friendly (multiple doors, level platform boarding), and offers the greatest economic development potential.

### The Modern Streetcar at a Glance

- 3.9 miles long; 18 stops
- 7 modern streetcar vehicles, including 1 spare
- Connects the University of Arizona to Downtown and the Mercado District.
- Service from 6:00 AM-2:00 AM
- Service frequency: 10 minutes daytime; 20 minutes evening & weekends
- Cost estimate: \$150 million for track and power infrastructure, vehicles, stations, and the maintenance and storage facility
- The Federal Transit Administration monitors the project.
- Key partners: University of Arizona, the Regional Transportation Authority, and Arizona Department of Transportation.
- The City of Tucson is authorized by the FTA to manage the project.
- Current status: Final design is nearing 50 percent completion.

Various bus technologies were evaluated in the Alternatives Analysis study, including diesel electric hybrid buses, electric trolley buses, and electric buses. Bus technologies were eliminated from consideration because of passenger capacity constraints (a streetcar can carry 130 passengers vv. a bus with an 80 passenger capacity) and operational costs.

Overall, modern streetcars are more effective than buses in generating economic development. Modern streetcar projects have proven to be a catalyst for downtown economic development in other western cities such as Portland, Oregon, and Seattle and Tacoma, Washington.

Modern streetcar systems have been shown to increase office and retail development within a quarter mile of stations and residential development within a half mile of stations. Modern streetcars can restructure market demand to take advantage of increased foot traffic, reduced parking, desire for mixed housing types, and proximity to cultural, shopping, and entertainment facilities. In addition, modern streetcar's permanent infrastructure—tracks—ensures the transit investment will stay in the same location, whereas bus routes can be moved. This permanent infrastructure investment offers developers, entrepreneurs, businesses and homebuyers a measure of confidence in making financial commitments along the streetcar route. In Tucson, the Gadsden Company and partners have invested more than \$20 million on the west side of Interstate 10, anticipating the positive economic impact of the streetcar stop in the Mercado District.

More and more people are choosing to live closer to urban centers and services so they can reduce commuting costs, be green and spend less time commuting. One of the ways that the modern streetcar can specifically support redevelopment is through transit oriented development (TOD). TOD is a development pattern that is

characterized by mixed use projects that cater to transit riders and pedestrians. TOD emphasizes the creation of compact, walkable areas centered around transit and tailors new development in the context of existing downtowns and surrounding neighborhoods. Overall, TOD has been proven to have a positive impact on real estate values, but more importantly, a positive impact on downtowns and surrounding neighborhoods. In Portland, more than \$1.4 billion in new development has been invested adjacent to their streetcar line.

Jim Glock is Director of the City of Tucson's Department of Transportation. He oversees the operations of the region's transit system, Sun Tran and Sun Van. Jim is a registered civil engineer in the State of Arizona. He can be reached at (520) 791-4371 or via email at [jim.glock@tucsonaz.gov](mailto:jim.glock@tucsonaz.gov).

**TREND**  
report

## Tucson Real Estate + New Development

Subscribe online at  
[www.trendreportaz.com](http://www.trendreportaz.com)

For Quotes on Corporate Subscriptions and Advertising Programs,  
Contact **Lucinda Smedley**  
at 520-603-2175 or [lucinda@trendreportaz.com](mailto:lucinda@trendreportaz.com)