

Rethinking ‘Bus vs. Trolley’

By Juhn Ruch October 5, 2007
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Meeting seeks broader dialogue

“Buses vs. trolleys.”

That’s been the bottom line of transit discussions in central Jamaica Plain for 20 years—the way the MBTA framed it when it “temporarily” replaced the Arborway Green Line trolley with the Route 39 bus in 1985.

It has become a sometimes bitter dispute, stirred up yet again last month by another confusing, chaotic state meeting about possible transit improvements in the corridor.

Political winds have sometimes favored buses, sometimes trolleys. Either way, it has long been presented as a choice of which mode can best squeeze through car traffic on a narrow street.

With “Rethinking Centre Street,” a film screening and expert panel discussion held Sept. 27 at the Connolly Branch Library, the pro-trolley Arborway Committee tried to break the habit and think about the street itself, rather than a particular transit mode.

The event didn’t really rethink Centre Street—the conversation quickly launched into large policy issues and community organizing basics rather than JP-specific visions. But it did rethink the whole transit conversation, bringing a variety of outside perspectives into JP’s often repetitive debate.

Most notably, the Arborway Committee—which still has an active lawsuit seeking trolley restoration—largely made good on its promise to be non-partisan. Its chosen film, “Contested Streets,” was virtually free of light rail, but showed several favorable examples of buses very similar to those currently running along the 39 route.

“I think a conversation like we’re going to have tonight has been a very long time coming,” said Arborway Committee head Franklyn Salimbene in a conciliatory introduction.

“People have a great difficulty envisioning Centre Street as different from the way it is today,” he said, explaining that the car dominance becomes an

implicit restraint on any transit or street improvement ideas.

While the Arborway corridor in JP includes S. Huntington Avenue and South Street, the forum—at least in theory—focused on the Centre Street part as the heart of JP’s business district.

The audience of about 70 appeared to be largely trolley advocates. Salimbene said the Arborway Committee may hold another forum, on a topic to be announced, next month.

Shared streets

“Contested Streets” is a 2006 documentary that contrasts New York City’s traffic nightmare with solutions in Copenhagen, Paris and London.

Its food for thought included the idea of sharing: pedestrian mall-style roads where walkers and bicyclists have priority, but cars can move slowly through as well. A similar idea is a priority street lane shared by buses, bikes and taxis. These options generally allow for wider sidewalks.

Such ideas are not unknown in Boston, and some were discussed during the brief era of official trolley restoration planning. But they have not been a regular part of the public discussion in JP.

Clearly applicable to JP was the film’s overarching critique of a kind of motion fetish in American traffic planning—a focus on making large numbers of cars move as quickly as possible, as opposed to a human-scale or neighborhood-oriented approach.

Much like the meeting itself, the film’s theme was that a solution to problems can involve redefining the problems.

The film was produced by the New York group Transportation Alternatives and had an unstated focus on its political priorities, which include bus rapid transit. As it wrapped up with a tribute to the genius of New York’s mayor and images of a cute toddler, it was easy to point out missing perspectives in the agenda, and several audience members did—particularly on the lack of light rail or streetcars in the film.

Who drove?

The panel included Tony Dutzik, an energy and transportation policy analyst with Frontier Group; Jane Holtz Kay, author of "Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took Over America and How We Can Take It Back"; and Jeffrey Rosenblum, executive director of Cambridge-based LivableStreets Alliance. Neighborhood Network News anchor Chris Lovett moderated.

It was clear that this was a different sort of transportation discussion when Kay violated the biggest taboo of the bus/trolley debate.

"Who in the audience came by car?" she asked.

The audience fell silent. An under-examined aspect of the local transit debate is that most of the key advocates themselves do not rely on public transit as their primary transportation. The meeting was held about a block away from two Route 39 bus stops.

"Everybody's afraid to say they drove," said Rosenblum, leaping to the crowd's rescue. He noted that driving is a valid choice, and that examining such decision-making is valuable in judging transit improvement options.

Still, Kay was not deterred. She later circled back with a gentler form of the question: "How many here have a car?" The large majority did.

The discussion was also different in its large-scale focus, though that also kept it away from the Centre Street vision that appeared to be one of the forum's goals. Policy issues, such as the possibility of the state taking over some of the MBTA's massive debt, were discussed more than trolleys were, even by fans of the latter.

John Dalzell asked the panel about economic arguments for giving preference to pedestrians and bicyclists over cars. Dalzell is a former chair of JP Centre/South Main Streets and is now the Boston Redevelopment Authority project manager on redevelopment of land around the Forest Hills T Station.

Rosenblum emphasized commercial benefits of restricting car parking, especially with fees. He noted that small businesses often oppose paid parking, fearing it will deter customers.

"That argument is really backward," he said, noting that free parking will always be full, and the area will become jammed with drivers circling to find a space. Paid parking, he said, limits the duration of parking, making it accessible to more customers.

Dutzik said that global warming concerns, energy costs and increasing gridlock are creating momentum for major transportation policy changes. Noting the pressing need to reduce greenhouse gases, he said, "There's literally no way to do it without reducing the amount of miles we travel in cars."

"What we need in this country is good models to point to," he said, suggesting a JP street improvement could be one.

After the forum, the panelists told the Gazette they have different experience levels with Centre Street. Kay was completely unfamiliar with it. Dutzik lived in JP for a year about 15 years ago and recalled Centre Street as an "asset." Rosenblum used to live on Jamaica Street and was once president of the board of Harvest Co-Op Market.

Dutzik and Rosenblum avoided taking sides in the bus-or-trolley vein, telling the Gazette that both modes have advantages. Dutzik said his group's research generally indicates that buses can be good for short-range travel and light rail for longer trips.

"The debate is getting pigeonholed into 'bus or trolley' rather than 'livable streets,'" Rosenblum told the Gazette, emphasizing that advocates on either side have more in common than not.

And right now, there's one thing all local transit advocates have in common, he said: "No one's getting anything."