

# DOWNTOWN TUCSONAN

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## Vital Signs

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### Streetcar Alignment Decided

#### Department of Transportation ready to move Modern Streetcar plan to Feds

*by Thomas Whittingslow*

**U**ntil recently, many questions about the Downtown segment of the planned modern streetcar route were unresolved. In order for the City to advance its application to the Federal Transportation Administration (FTA) for funds to match the local RTA commitment, a "Project Definition" must be approved by the local governing body, the city council. With a recent agreement between the City and various stakeholders that the western terminus of the streetcar line will run north from the Cultural Plaza of Rio Nuevo, along the new Avenida del Convento, to Congress Street, it appears that the route has been finalized, and the Project Definition is in sight.

The one-third-mile-long section of tracks connecting the proposed museum campus with Congress Street, opposite the El Rio Center, would run between the Mercado at Menlo District development already under construction, and a 14-acre site that is being offered by the City for sale to qualified developers. Coupled with a solution for crossing I-10 and the Santa Cruz River, and agreement on the streetcar's route along Congress and Broadway between The Hotel Arizona and the 4th Avenue underpass, the decision on the western terminus allows TDOT to bring a final alignment plan forward to the Mayor and Council. According to Andrew Singelakis, Deputy Director of TDOT, the next step will be formal ratification of the "locally preferred alternative" alignment by the Council, scheduled to take place on March 27th. With the routing issue finally resolved, the City can now successfully compete for the federal funds necessary to begin construction.

This is clearly a victory for Lillian Lopez-Grant, who made appeals to extend the line's terminus north from the Cultural Plaza along Avenida del Convento. Lopez-Grant is a Menlo Park resident and president of the Westside Coalition of neighborhoods. The Avenida del Convento extension would allow service to the new Mercado at Menlo District mixed-use project, as well as the established residents of Menlo Park. It is also good news for Donovan Durband, Executive Director of the Tucson Downtown Alliance

and other advocates who see the Modern Streetcar as a catalyst for private mixed-use development along the line.

"This is a people-moving system, rather than a commuter train," said Project Director Shellie Ginn. "It extends people's pedestrian opportunities. The unique problem that we're having with this project is that everyone wants one more piece, one more access."

The final route for the line starts at the University of Arizona on Helen Street, west of Campbell Avenue, then continues south on Cherry to the UA student housing centers along 2nd Street to Park Avenue. From the Main Gate Square business district it follows University Blvd. west to 4th Avenue, where it continues south past the shops, restaurants and nightclubs to the new 4th Avenue underpass. The line is split between Congress and Broadway, with a set of tracks on each street, and the two tracks converge west of Veinte de Agosto Park.

The streetcar line will service the Historic Depot on Toole Avenue, the Warehouse Arts District, Ronstadt Transit Center, City Hall and the Federal Courthouse. One of the criteria is to provide easy pedestrian access to such venues as the Fox Theatre, Centennial Hall, the Main Public Library, as well as the Tucson Convention Center, new hotel, and the public and private projects on the West Side.

With the Project Definition phase completed, only two major tasks remain before construction on the line can begin. First, an environmental impact study must be conducted, and additional funding must be obtained. According to Shellie Ginn, Project Director, "The entire process could be completed in about two years."

Ginn is enthusiastic about the pace of the process.

A major portion of the funding has already been obtained. The Regional Transportation Authority election provided \$90 million, or about half of the capital costs for the development of the system. Once the environmental impact study is complete, Ginn and her consulting team will develop grant applications to the FTA's Small Starts program for the balance of the funding. If all goes well the system could be operational by 2010.

Downtown Portland, Oregon, often cited as the cutting edge of urban innovation, is often used as a model for the Tucson system. According to USA Today, "Portland's Pearl District, a new urban core, has attracted about 100 projects worth \$2.3 billion in less than five years, all within two blocks of the line, including 7,428 housing units. Ridership was more than triple the projections." In the same article Len Bandrup, Director of Transportation for Kenosha, Wisconsin said, "Streetcars have sex appeal. It resonates with folks...developers don't write check for buses."

In some cases where modern streetcar projects have enhanced the value of planned communities, developers have participated in the funding. We asked the Tucson transportation department if Rio Development or other developers will be approached to participate in funding of the Tucson line. "That is one of the areas that we will be looking at," said Ginn.