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It's too early to judge the streetcar

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By Michael Geisler

Eight weeks into service, the Atlanta Streetcar is off to a great start. Ridership numbers have topped 100,000; sales are up for businesses along the route; over \$561 million has been invested in the streetcar neighborhoods in the past five years and another \$684 million is under construction; the first “Atlanta Streetcar Adventure” was a roaring success with over 1,000 participants, and daily operations have been safe and smooth. The streetcar is a critical piece of Atlanta’s transit puzzle, accomplishing three key objectives: Provide circulation through the city’s downtown business, university and tourist districts; generate economic growth, and connect riders to MARTA and regional transit options at the Peachtree Center station.

Detractors believing they understand the complicated technical and operational issues of a transit system, lock onto a number – say, a ridership projection based on a model prepared by MARTA, and more applicable to a commuter-based system – and elevate that modeled projection to a rigid fact to attack the city.

What they declined to explain is that the projected ridership of 2,600 is an average weekday ridership over a 12-month period, not taking into account that ridership is higher during the spring and summer months. The critics indicated the city’s target for the 48-day period between Dec. 30 and Feb. 15 was 124,800, and ridership fell short by 18 percent. That is simply not true.

First, the city doesn’t have a “target ridership.” We have a modeled projection that is helpful as a gauge, not as a battering ram.

Second, the 2,600 projection is not a daily projection. It’s a weekday ridership projection. The assertion that we fell short by 18 percent is based on an elementary calculation of 2,600 multiplied by 48 days. Factually, there were only 34 weekdays between Dec. 30 and Feb. 15. Multiply that number by the projection, and the expected ridership would be 88,400. In which case, actual streetcar ridership exceeded projections by 13,600 riders.

Here’s the point: Pegging the success or failure of the streetcar to ridership in the first six weeks is fundamentally misleading and unfair. We’re taking the long view and are pleased with the early results, and not just about ridership. The redevelopment and re-use of underutilized properties is clear to anyone who wants to see. The streetcar means more walkers, more cyclists, more density and, ultimately, a more livable downtown.

Approximately \$48 million in federal dollars contributed almost 50 percent of total construction costs. Additional federal funds to the tune of \$12.2 million for support projects that reduce congestion and improve air quality – which the Atlanta Streetcar does – will defray annual operating costs for the first four years.

Leveraging federal dollars, private partnerships and city funds is the smart approach. The return on our investment will bear this out, but not after only eight weeks.

Every important infrastructure investment in this city has had critics who questioned its value. The referendum to build MARTA passed by less than 1,000 votes; the extension of Ga. 400 was decried as a boondoggle; even the project now hailed as the best rehabilitation project in the world – the Atlanta Beltline – was mocked initially. In every instance, the decision to invest in the future and bet on Atlanta was the right one. The Atlanta Streetcar will be the same.

Michael Geisler is chief operating officer of the Atlanta Streetcar.

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