

# Catalytic commitment

A nonprofit plans to prove they can operate a transit system and revive a city

**D**etroit's M-1 Rail is an unprecedented public-private partnership that includes local, regional, state and federal partners working together to design and build a circulating streetcar that supports and enhances the city's vibrancy.

Shortly after the 2006 Super Bowl concluded, the same citizens who helped bring the event to the Motor City sat down together once more and re-envisioned how they could help move our city forward. That visioning was the catalyst for what would become a model for collaboration, commitment, foresight and follow-through.

The group created M-1 Rail in 2007. The non-profit, 501(c)(3) corporation is the first traffic project being led and funded by private businesses and philanthropic organizations in partnership with local governments, the state of Michigan and the U.S. DOT. Soon, it will be operating a 3.3-mile, circulating streetcar route along Woodward Avenue connecting employers, entertainment venues, universities, hospitals and neighborhoods. The \$137 million project will also include 19 stations and loading platforms and a vehicle-storage and maintenance facility.

We began envisioning this project after we saw what the Super Bowl did for the city. We want Detroit to keep progressing. As part of our mission to be a catalyst for development, we came up with a concept of a streetcar system



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that allows us to connect all of the assets in the backbone of the city.

## Circulating vision

As we worked to update legislation so that a nonprofit could operate a transit business, we began a business case study funded by the business, institutional and philanthropic communities here. After about a year, we completed an exhaustive evaluation to the approach and vision that became M-1 Rail.

Those of us at M-1 Rail worked with the professionals at HNTB Corp. to conduct a study to determine if the streetcar vision was truly feasible. It was. HNTB became the owner's representative of the project in May 2013.

HNTB began by creating a business plan for M-1, which included an action plan for moving forward. That document served as the roadmap that gained support from the state of Michigan and directed efforts that helped obtain a \$25 million Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery grant from the U.S. DOT.

The streetcar route is completely

new and will be supported by new infrastructure. Our intent is to build an urban circulator along Woodward Avenue connecting employers, employees, entertainment venues, sporting events, educational institutions and hospitals. We seek to reactivate the streets linking downtown, midtown, and the New Center and North End areas.

## Building harmony

More than 30 sponsors, partners, funders and other supporters have rallied to support our M-1 efforts. Meeting the needs of this group can be challenging. However, we find that building and maintaining consensus helps keep activity progressing.

We have a great geographic diversity here. Downtown is the center of commerce in terms of major employers, then there is the entertainment district. As we move farther north, we get into hospitals, universities and traditional, residential neighborhoods. Each of these groups has different needs.

To address those needs, we have created a community advisory

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communicating with each other.

The communications and input does not stop there. We populated all of our councils with representatives who mirror the communities they serve. For example, bicyclists, senior citizens and residents who meet the Americans with Disabilities Act guidelines all have voices contributing to the final project. In fact, the latter group had input on streetcar design, which was included in the request for proposal for streetcar vendors.

That openness extends internally as well. The project incorporates a construction manager-general contractor approach. This allows us to bring contractor personnel in early so they have a clear understanding of the approach.

It really boils down to communications—internally and with external stakeholders.

It is an understatement to say that we are working on an aggressive timeline. Construction is scheduled to begin in early 2014 with revenue operations set for the third quarter of 2016. This schedule aligns with the extensive retail investment strategy in place. Plus, it is sound business.

Case studies show that \$4 to \$8 is returned for every \$1 spent on streetcar development. A streetcar is a true economic driver. We are already expecting \$400 million to \$500 million in additional development.

### Streetcar renaissance

While it is true that streetcars activate streets, they really activate sidewalks. They essentially create jobs at all levels from small restaurants to dry cleaners to delivery services. Detroit is home to a massive student population. They are part of a generation who want to live where a car is not required, but they still need a way to move about town. Plus, we are moving people downtown. Our

residential occupancy rate is in the high 90th percentile and we get 10 million to 12 million visitors a year.

Detroit, like some other U.S. cities, is ripe for a streetcar and the development it brings. Read what Elizabeth Rao, chair, public-transit services at HNTB, said:

“Streetcars are enjoying a renaissance throughout the U.S. as communities understand the value of creating attractive downtown areas that promote livability. Streetcars can link residential housing, higher-density development and entertainment venues with an active pedestrian and scalable transportation environment. Streetcars become the ‘glue’ in creating an urban environment with a strong sense of place, attracting businesses, residents and visitors.”

“Streetcars, like any fixed-guideway transit solution, must be coupled with transit-supportive land-use and zoning policies to create an environment for development interests and future economic development.”

Rao is right. The key thing is to make sure we are integrating the development and transit. They have to work in harmony.

We have to remember that this is infrastructure. It is designed to serve a greater population, not just development.

It is this coupling that M-1 Rail and its many partners plan to achieve. With a strong urban core, transit routes that connect to other parts of the city and an evolving downtown, M-1 Rail will be the catalyst that creates an environment that meets the needs of residents, employers and visitors with the help of one of the more modern streetcar approaches in the country. **TM&E**

Childs is chief operating officer for M-1 Rail. Webb is a senior project manager with HNTB.



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council made up of all constituents. In addition, we have a business advisory group that includes owners and managers of small and large businesses along the corridor. We are all