

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



Why was the Winston-Salem Urban Circulator Study initiated?

In 2006, the City of Winston-Salem completed the Streetcar Feasibility Study, evaluating the potential for a streetcar in the City. One goal of the study was to identify an appropriate technology and route to achieve the transit objectives in The Legacy Plan and the Downtown Development Plan. One of The Legacy 2030 Plan recommendations was to “Build a center city streetcar system that will create linkages and spur business and development growth between the universities, medical centers, Piedmont Triad Research Park, central city neighborhoods and the Downtown area”.

In response, the City and PART have jointly initiated the Winston-Salem Urban Circulator Study to evaluate this proposal in more detail, and to consider other potential transit options that could enhance mobility and help meet other community goals in the downtown area. This study is also a requirement for the future use of federal funds for any project that may emerge from the study process.

What will this study involve?

The Winston-Salem Urban Circulator Study examines the impacts, costs and benefits of improving transit within downtown, connecting the major employers and underdeveloped land. The study will look at potential options for building an urban circulator (e.g. streetcar or enhanced bus service) within a two to three mile corridor through Winston-Salem’s downtown. Project goals will be identified at the outset. Community input will be solicited over the course of the study through Technical and Policy Committees, numerous stakeholder meetings, and community open houses.

The study will culminate with the selection of a “Locally Preferred Alternative” to potentially advance into further study and project development.

What is the proposed route?

In 2006, the Streetcar Feasibility Study recommended a proposed route that began at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center, traveled through downtown via Burke St., 4th St., and 5th St., and connected to Piedmont Triad Research Park. A near-term extension to Winston-Salem State University was also identified.

Five years have passed since the initial recommendation was made, so this study will take a fresh look at all route options in the study area. One of the primary outputs of the study process will be the identification of a preferred route.

Will buses be considered too?

The study will evaluate all reasonable transit technologies that may be viable for the project, including rail-based technologies and bus-based technologies. Rail and bus options will be compared to determine which type of vehicle would best achieve desired goals.

With the current budget shortfalls, why is this being studied now?

The study is an initial step to enable the City to pursue federal funding for the project. An environmental assessment and design and engineering work, a process that could take several years, must occur before

construction begins. Recognizing the long lead time for this type of project, now is the time to plan for success. Furthermore, this type of study is required to receive federal funds that could be used to support project financing. Postponing this study would potentially delay the City's ability to leverage competitive federal funds.

Completing this study does not commit any further funds from any source to a streetcar or bus project, nor does it commit the City to proceed to construction.

How does this study fit into the community vision for Winston-Salem?

The City's Downtown Plan and Legacy 2030 Update identify a range of strategies to guide future initiatives within Winston-Salem, many of which include expanding and promoting the use of transit. The City's vision focuses on creating a sustainable city, encouraging economic development, promoting residential development in downtown, maintaining a community with special character and identity, and supporting a high quality of life. PART's Regional Transit Development Plan also emphasizes the role of existing and new transit modes in promoting mobility. One of the objectives of the Winston-Salem Urban Circulator Study is to support city and regional goals by providing a new travel option for circulating through downtown and surrounding areas, connecting to other transit hubs, and encouraging economic development.

How will this project benefit Winston-Salem?

A strong transportation infrastructure makes our city more attractive for investment and improves our overall quality of life. In addition to providing more transportation choice, transit reduces carbon emissions, encourages pedestrian activity and improves local public health. The Urban Circulator project also aims to use transit options to support and encourage sustainable growth, as recommended in the 2020 Legacy Plan.

Downtown Winston-Salem contains a concentration of employment, cultural, educational and medical facilities. By encouraging greater development and investment in this area through an urban circulator project, new jobs will be created, and the City, County, and State will benefit through increased tax and sales revenues resulting from new development.

Why isn't the study considering longer routes (or more routes) to connect other neighborhoods?

The Urban Circulator Study focuses on Winston-Salem's downtown as the area with the greatest concentration of activities and the highest density development (floor area ratio) in the county. A potential first phase should be relatively short (about 2 to 3 miles) to minimize project costs and increase the chances for implementation.

However, potential future extension beyond a first phase will be considered in the study process. PART's Regional Transit Development Plan recommended that a future extension might incorporate a connection from downtown to Wake Forest University and UNC School of the Arts. Other cities have envisioned how a larger network of streetcar lines might fit with their initial streetcar route: Portland, OR

constructed an initial 2-mile streetcar route in 2001. The line has since been extended three times, and another 3-mile extension is under construction today.

Are streetcars in operation elsewhere?

Streetcar systems are in operation in fourteen US cities including mid-sized cities such as Little Rock, AR, and Tacoma, WA, as well as numerous international cities. Local municipalities and transit authorities are working together in about 30 additional US cities to study the feasibility of introducing streetcar to their transit networks. For example, Washington, DC has plans for a 37-mile streetcar network.

How is streetcar different than other rail technologies?

Streetcars are similar to, but differ from Light Rail. The main difference is purpose: streetcars cover a shorter distance (typically 2-3 mile segments) and support local mobility and short trips. Light Rail runs at higher speeds and is generally designed to transport commuters over longer distances within a city or between suburban locations and downtown. Streetcars are also lighter vehicles and can operate on local streets, in mixed traffic with automobiles and bicycles. The rail is embedded “flush” with the road network. Light Rail typically requires a dedicated right-of-way and is more complex and costly to construct.

Would local bus routes be impacted by a new streetcar system?

Streetcar would be only one tool in the transit toolbox. Streetcars would complement and work in conjunction with existing bus and potential commuter rail services to serve different areas, meet different mobility needs, and help achieve different goals.

How frequently would a streetcar operate?

Streetcars typically operate with a high frequency of service (10 to 15 minutes) to increase the attractiveness of the service. Details will be refined as the study progresses.

Who would use a new Urban Circulator service?

We anticipate that employees, students, residents, and visitors looking to make short-distance trips between destinations in the downtown area will use the service. In particular, streetcars are designed to serve relatively short-distance trips that may be slightly too long for people to walk, but too short to justify the inconvenience of traveling by auto and dealing with parking (streetcar is often termed a “walk extender”).

Urban circulators also serve as the “last mile” connection for regional transit services. For example, an urban circulator would connect to transportation hubs to provide the final link from transit routes serving other parts of the city and region to final destinations in the downtown area.