

Laying the tracks

The High Level Line Society wants to make the streetcar viable again – but that may be more difficult than it sounds

By Jackson Spring

COVID-19 allowing, on the May long weekend, the High Level Bridge Streetcar will start its five-month season. At 40-minute intervals, two antique cars will leisurely take passengers on a brief historical and scenic tour, back and forth along the single line that runs from the barn behind the Old Strathcona Farmers' Market, over the High Level bridge, to a small platform near Jasper Avenue.

At the southern terminal, rail enthusiasts can also visit the Strathcona Streetcar Barn & Museum. Here, they can look at other restored cars that aren't operational, old signal lights and station signs. And they can browse through the expansive collection of photographs and drawings, and maps of what the streetcar system used to be – back when riding the rails wasn't something to do on a free afternoon, but the foremost method of mass transportation in Edmonton.

At its peak in 1930, the Edmonton Radial Railway consisted of eight lines that reached every corner of the then much smaller city. As neighbourhoods expanded and cars proliferated, streetcars were gradually replaced by the buses, until the system was closed entirely in 1951.

'What the High Level line envisions is connecting all of the missing links'

The Edmonton Radial Railway Society formed in 1980 with the purpose of restoring old cars and reopening the line on the High Level Bridge as a tourist attraction, and, now, a proposed redesign is looking to get back a tiny piece of its history as a functional transit service.

“What the High Level Line envisions is connecting all of the missing links,” says Gillian Thomson, vice-president of the High Level Line Society.

The HLLS began as friends getting together for after-work drinks – and a round of complaining about how the transit system forced them to choose between spending their evenings on Whyte Avenue or downtown.

“When you look on a map, the two are actually very close,” Thomson says. “They just seem so disconnected.”

The group started drawing up concept art for a solution inspired by [The High Line](#), New York City's

2.3-kilometre trail and park built on a disused elevated railway spur. This evolved into a 4.3-kilometre-long “multi-modal thread,” says the HLLS website. It would consist of

multiple parks, plazas and pedestrian malls, using the streetcar line as the backbone.

In 2018, they revealed their pet project to the public, which Thomson says gave it an “overwhelmingly positive response.” The concept won two urban design awards in 2019, from the City of Edmonton and the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects.

After that, the group got more serious, put together a more comprehensive design, and submitted a proposal to the City of Edmonton, asking for \$85,000 for office space and staff, and to help legitimize the project in the eyes of other prospective stakeholders.

On [Dec. 3, 2019](#), the City approved the funds and, speaking to the press, Mayor Don Iveson said: “I’ve been a big fan of the High Level Line and what it could do to spur development, create community, and link together kind of what have been two solitudes at times in our city.”

As Thomson says, “He’s been a huge supporter all along.”

Though the High Level Line isn’t just about the streetcar, one of the most critical components is an expansion of the tracks on either end – the block-and-a-half needed to reach Whyte Avenue on the South Side, and about five blocks to the north, up 110th Street through the coincidentally named Railtown Park, until it reaches its new northern terminal at MacEwan University. The HLLS says this adjustment to the line would help transform the streetcar from a leisure activity into a viable option for people commuting between the two prominent commercial zones.

“We don’t want to change it to be high-speed rail or anything,” Thomson says. “We love the slower pace and fun experience of taking the streetcar – but we’d love to see (how it would do) if it was all year and more accessible to commuter-type traffic.”

The expansion would help achieve this goal by putting the streetcar through busier and more visible areas, and by indirectly connecting Edmonton’s two major universities. (U of A is a 10-minute bus ride to the west of the southern terminal.) It would have the advantage over the LRT of being a more direct line to Whyte Avenue, and over the bus by still being able to operate near-independent of the automobile grid, which is especially important in the high-traffic zones through which it would pass.

The project is not without its flaws.

For one, the Edmonton Radial Railway Society – the non-profit formed in 1980 that restores the old streetcars and operates the line across the High Level Bridge – says some of the specifics of the

design pose safety concerns. One of the concept images shows a pedestrian path on the inside of the Garneau Tunnel, right beside the tracks. Vice-president of the ERRS, Dustin Creviston, says that “from a safety perspective, this is a non-starter.”

*'We can't just have pedestrians
in the tunnel with the streetcar'*

“The illustrations are imaginative, but they are not very truthful to the actual geometry of the tunnel,” he says. “The streetcar takes up a good chunk of it. If you widened it, that would be extremely costly. But, primarily, from a safety perspective, we just can't have pedestrians in the tunnel with the streetcar. It's tight quarters, dimly lit, and not separated enough.”

Another image shows people walking on the top deck of the High Level Bridge, which poses similar problems as the tunnel, and would require moving the tracks over to one side of the bridge, which would be costly and potentially hazardous.

“It could potentially cause some structural issues,” Creviston says. “It would be an eccentric load on the bridge, which would subject it to stress. With the trolley currently running down the middle, it's balanced.”

Yet, he adds, “overall, we are supportive of the initiative.”

Both groups say they are confident that solutions to these design challenges can be found with relative ease. However, there is a bigger and more fundamental problem with the High Level Line: it would take more than new tracks to reform the streetcar into a practical means of getting around.

“We're not a force to be reckoned with in terms of moving people,” Creviston says.

The ERRS is comprised entirely of volunteers, and in its present state, it would not be able to handle a weekday commute's worth of traffic.

“This is primarily a hobby for our membership, and it would be challenging to source enough volunteers to run that frequency of cars,” he says. “Right now, we are able to operate one shift from 11 to 4 on a weekday.”

In particular, Creviston says, it would be difficult to find people able to work morning and evening shifts, when a lot of the traffic likely will hit. Even if they did find the people, he adds, the fact that streetcar schedules are designed to avoid rush hour is important to the operation, as Edmonton's traffic infrastructure is not equipped for streetcar crossings. Not only does the High Level Line propose a greater frequency of streetcars, but it would also have the cars cross the six-lane 104th Avenue to get to MacEwan. (It would, however, cross a bridge to get over Jasper Avenue.)

Traffic is not the only issue. Part of the reason the streetcar only operates from May to October is that every car in the fleet is an antique, and not all are equipped for Alberta weather conditions.

“One of the cars that runs on the High Level is an original from Edmonton, so that would be fine,” Creviston, says. “But the other is from Australia, and it isn’t equipped with any heating.”

Even in their heyday, the streetcars had problems running in Edmonton winters. The system required separate snow-sweeper cars to clear the tracks after a snowfall, but the passenger cars would frequently get stuck anyways. In those cases, drivers would pour sand through a hole in the floor by the wheels, for traction.

The HLLS is not discouraged by the problems with their concept so far. It is still a concept, after all.

*‘They are coming at it
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“We are trying to keep it still very high-level idea-driven at this point, and not as much in the nitty-gritty of day-to-day operations,” says Thomson. “They (the ERRS) are coming at it from a really practical perspective, and specific to their operations.”

And, there is plenty of time to work out the details. At this stage, the HLLS still need to do a design study, find the vast majority of the funds it needs, and get the multitude of construction and zoning permissions. Thomson estimates construction won't begin on the High Level Line for another five years.

The project has also been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The HLLS was supposed to meet with city council on March 23 to discuss the specifics of the funding promised in December, and other forms of assistance, such as tax receipts and letters of support, but [council meetings have been suspended](#) until April 27.

“We feel like we’re in a bit of a holding pattern right now,” Thomson says.

With the enthusiasm it has received from the city and the public so far, Thomson says she is confident that the project will go through in one form or another. But it will be some time before commuters will be taking the streetcar again – if ever.

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