



The Ballooning Cost of Streetcars

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By: *Graham Renz*

Last summer, the [Kansas City Star](#) tried to defend the city from the charge that it overpaid for its 2.2-mile downtown streetcar line. They compared the costs of Kansas City's streetcar to similar projects in other cities and concluded the City paid an average price. Kansas City's expensive streetcar was not as expensive as other expensive streetcar systems—[great, right?](#)

It looks like the city's "frugality" will be overshadowed by the massive costs of a [proposed expansion](#) that would extend the current line 3.75 miles south from Union Station to the Plaza and UMKC.

The projected construction costs for the extension are estimated at \$227M (in 2019 dollars), and the downtown line cost \$102M (in 2014 dollars) to build. After adjusting for inflation, on a per-mile basis, that makes Kansas City's proposed expansion one of the most expensive streetcar projects in the nation.

	Kansas City - Expansion	Kansas City - Downtown	Portland	Seattle	Tucson	Cincinnati	St. Louis Loop Trolley	Salt Lake City
Year Opened	Proposed - 2021	2016	2001	2007	2014	2015	2016	2013
Length	3.75	2.2	4.6	1.3	3.9	3.6	2.2	2
Total Construction Cost	\$211M	\$102	\$76M	\$64M	\$196M	\$148M	\$43M	\$57.2M

Cost per Mile	\$56.3M	\$46.4M	\$16.5M	\$49.2M	\$50.2M	\$41.1M	\$19.5M	\$28.6M
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All figures in 2014 dollars

As the chart above shows, the cost per mile of the proposed expansion is over 20% greater than that of the downtown starter line. Even if the city got a good deal—if we can call it that—on the downtown line, it surely won't if expansion occurs.

The only streetcar more expensive than Kansas City's proposed expansion is Washington D.C.'s 2.4 mile H-St. line, which cost over \$200M to build. But besting D.C.'s line isn't much to brag about—it's been described as one of the most [poorly handled streetcar projects](#) in the nation.

So as efforts mount to expand the streetcar beyond downtown, Kansas Citians should ask themselves: Are we willing to pay higher sales and property taxes to fund one of the most expensive streetcar projects in the country?

Although the rail boosters hope to garner a \$100M grant from the feds, the city itself will be on the hook for \$130M. More on the financial breakdown of the proposed expansion in my next blog!

Note: Figures adjusted to 2014 dollars with CPI deflator, assuming 2% annual inflation 2017-19.

About the Author



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[4] https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bx1_a32nv3z2TllycHRfTXoyeDQ/view

[5] https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/how-dc-spent-200-million-over-a-decade-on-a-streetcar-you-still-cant-ride/2015/12/05/3c8a51c6-8d48-11e5-acff-673ae92ddd2b_story.html

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