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June 26-July 2, 2003

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A Trolley Good System



Public transit is the way to go.

by Joanne Aitken

TRAINING DAY: Think public next time you have to go somewhere.

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

possible. So those of you who squander your time and elevate your blood pressure on the roadways, consider this:

Every workday for the last 20 years I've been picked up a block from my house and deposited almost at my office door. Though my chauffeur is SEPTA, it's hard to view this as anything but a luxury. My transit -- the Green Line or subway surface but known to its users as the trolley -- is, in my view, the premiere component of the SEPTA system. Transit-oriented development may be the current buzz among planners, but our West Philadelphia Streetcar Suburb is the real McCoy, offering 100 years of proof that the idea of linking housing, shopping, recreation and work by public transit is a winner.

Close at hand. Several trolley lines thread their way through this walkable neighborhood, stopping at every block. Inbound I catch the 13 one block -- or the 34 two blocks -- from home. Outbound I take whichever comes first.

Frequent and quick. I don't worry about schedule. Both run every four minutes at rush hour, about every 10 minutes midday and about every 20 minutes late at night. Since neighborhood traffic is light, surface travel is speedy even with stops at each block, and the trolley ducks underground where the traffic gets thick. The trip takes 15 minutes one way, faster than I can drive it, and there's no parking to find -- or pay for -- at the other end.

Dependable. I remember only one day ever when the trolley didn't run -- a terrible ice storm -- and snow storms that fill the roads with fender benders have little effect on its schedule. On the rare occasion that service is disrupted, I'm never left stranded. My total yearly delay is nothing compared to what drivers face weekly in traffic snarls.

Attractive and well-maintained. Trolleys are cute: A single car with a quiet engine and no diesel fumes, which communicates by ringing its bell, the trolley is a vehicle with appealing personality. The ride is smooth since it glides on tracks. The windows are large, the interiors light and airy, the heat and air-conditioning dependable, the cars clean and the drivers generally friendly. More than can be said for most cars on the road.

Reading time. Among the high points of my day is reading on the trolley -- a treasured way to begin and end the workday. How much would you pay for a bit of quiet, uninterrupted time alone, with no demands? It costs me \$1.30.

Neighbors and friends. Several times a week I find myself sharing one leg of the commute with a friend or neighbor and get the chance to catch up. The serendipity never fails to remind me how much I enjoy living in the community I do.

Scenic view. If I return from work too tired to lift a finger, I needn't. I sit back and enjoy the view of soccer players and dogs in the park, flowering front yards, new paint jobs, Christmas lights or whatever the season brings.

Shopping and dining. Need milk for breakfast? Something for dinner? By boarding or alighting a block or two from my regular stop I can get coffee at the Green Line Cafe ("No. 34 Trolley to 43rd -- Arrive at our front door!"), buy directly from the farmers in Clark Park from June through November, pick up more substantial fare at the Fire House Market (a mini Reading Terminal) or patronize a range of venues in between, including a hardware store and several quirky, locally owned restaurants.

Car-free option. Possibly the greatest luxury of all. I've been involuntarily without a car for six months. Life is possible and not too inconvenient. Should I be surprised? I can name several neighbors who have been car-free for years, if not decades, though (only!) one car per family is the norm. These are not people who need to go without but working professionals who can -- because of public transit -- choose to shed the expense and bother of car ownership and still maintain a "normal" life. How many places in the U.S. is this possible? Only a special few.

That's the lifestyle in a well-planned, transit-oriented development. All these benefits and guilt-free, too! We should all be so lucky.

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