



COURTESY COLUMBUS
DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT CORP.

A streetcar in Portland, Oregon.

Will there be streetcars?

Downtown

Dennis McGinn, the chairman of the working group that gave a thumbs-up to the streetcar proposal for downtown Columbus, is confident the sleek electric vehicles will be zooming quietly on High Street.

But not this year.

Instead, the next 12 months will be spent laying the groundwork: finalizing the route, identifying funding sources and then getting bids to build the line and buy the streetcars.

McGinn, a Battelle executive and a retired U.S. Navy admiral, says his group researched streetcar lines recently built in cities such as Portland, Oregon, and Albuquerque, New Mexico. It found that streetcars can spur economic development—at a rate of five to six times greater than the initial investment depending on the length of the route. (The route proposed by McGinn's group includes a basic north-south line along High Street from the Short North to German Village, but could expand to the Arena District and Ohio State.)

Of course, everything depends on funding. While Mayor Michael Coleman, who launched the idea, says, "I'm a believer," he won't commit to the plan until the number-crunchers are finished—which might happen by mid 2007.

Supporters got a boost at the end of November when the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission recommended that \$20 million in federal funds be designated for streetcars, which could cost about \$80 million to start.

McGinn says he hopes to educate Columbus residents about streetcars, which are different from the ones that once ran along High Street. The kind being considered for Columbus looks like an extra-long city bus and runs on rails embedded in existing lanes of traffic.

He thinks the idea is a winner. "I'm 100 percent sure it's the right time and the right initiative to accelerate the good things that are already happening in downtown Columbus," he says.

—Alice Hohl