

The OKC Streetcar

Transporting OKC to the Future

Foster Hillis & Eileah Hale

White Paper | Dr. Melody Rowlett

A QUICK RIDE
Executive Summary

In the fall of 2009, Oklahoma City Residents voted to approve the MAPS 3 (Metro Area Projects) city tax by a vote of 54.30% (Estus & Dean, 2009); from that capital improvement program came funding for the Oklahoma City Streetcar, in the sum of $135 million (About Us, n.d.). The Streetcar operates two (2) routes covering 4.8 miles from its opening, and still today, connecting Midtown, Automobile Alley, the City Center, and Bricktown (Route Map, 2021). According to the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber from 2011 – 2018, in the three (3) blocks surrounding the two (2) routes of the Streetcar, there have been an additional $1.6 billion of public value and private investment and a net increase of 5,700 jobs (Oklahoma City Streetcar Investment Impact Analysis, 2018).

However, with the introduction of the COVID-19 global Pandemic, and at last report, ridership has dramatically fallen, with only 4,373 riders in April of 2020 while April 2019 brought 29,660 riders (Patterson, 2020). The low ridership is a symptom felt by the more extensive EMBARK public transport system (the company that runs the Streetcar). Comparing the OKC Streetcar system with a similar system in Kansas City, the OKC Streetcar system is failing—badly. The Kansas City



The OKC Streetcar.

system in 2019 saw five (5) times as many riders even though their route is half (1/2) as long as the system in Oklahoma City (Brake, 2020).

A RIDE DOWN MEMORY LANE
History of the Streetcar

The Oklahoma City Streetcar's foundation started originally in 1903 and spanned until 1947, with stops in Downtown OKC, El Reno, Guthrie, & Norman (ACOG). While little of the original streetcar routes exist now, it helped kickstart the idea of MAPS 3 and the inner-city workings and routes of Oklahoma City. It is essential to note the economic connection and advantage the first Streetcar going through OKC had on its real estate developers,

Anton Classen and John Shartel. The privately-owned system controlled the Streetcar to Classen & Shartel's land holdings and public businesses and heavily influenced the City's growth.



The Oklahoma City Railcar, a precurser to the Streetcars.

In 2005, the OKC Streetcar was first talked about during EMBARK's Regional 2030 plan (a strategic planning session) regarding public transportation in central Oklahoma and its future here. However, it was not until 2009 until OKC residents passed the MAPS 3 initiative to fund the Streetcar through a temporary one-cent (1¢) added sales tax. The original plan was built for the downtown OKC area and would be a full-service, modern streetcar system to add jobs and integrate commuters, workers, and visitors to OKC's local businesses through the Downtown & Bricktown routes. In 2011, the proposed streetcar route was announced to the public. The following year, multiple agencies assembled the projected economic impact it would have on Oklahoma City and collaborated on the Transit Oriented Development (TOD). The streetcar route was finalized in 2013, and twelve (12) years after it was envisioned, constriction for the Streetcar began in February of 2017. It was not until a year later until seven (7) streetcars would harness the line and transport thousands of OKC residents after being delivered from Pennsylvania. However, after thirteen (13) years in the making, the OKC streetcar began its service in December of 2018. Since the announcement of where the Streetcar would transport OKC residents, business boomed and, "the taxable market value of private properties...increased more than three times the rate of citywide property values since 2011" (Oklahoma City Streetcar Investment Impact Analysis, 2018). Not only did the Streetcar transform public property in OKC, but it also made way for and stakeholders to invest in their City.

RIDERS (AND NON-RIDERS)
Stakeholders of the Streetcar

When looking at the connections of the stakeholders of the Streetcar project as well as

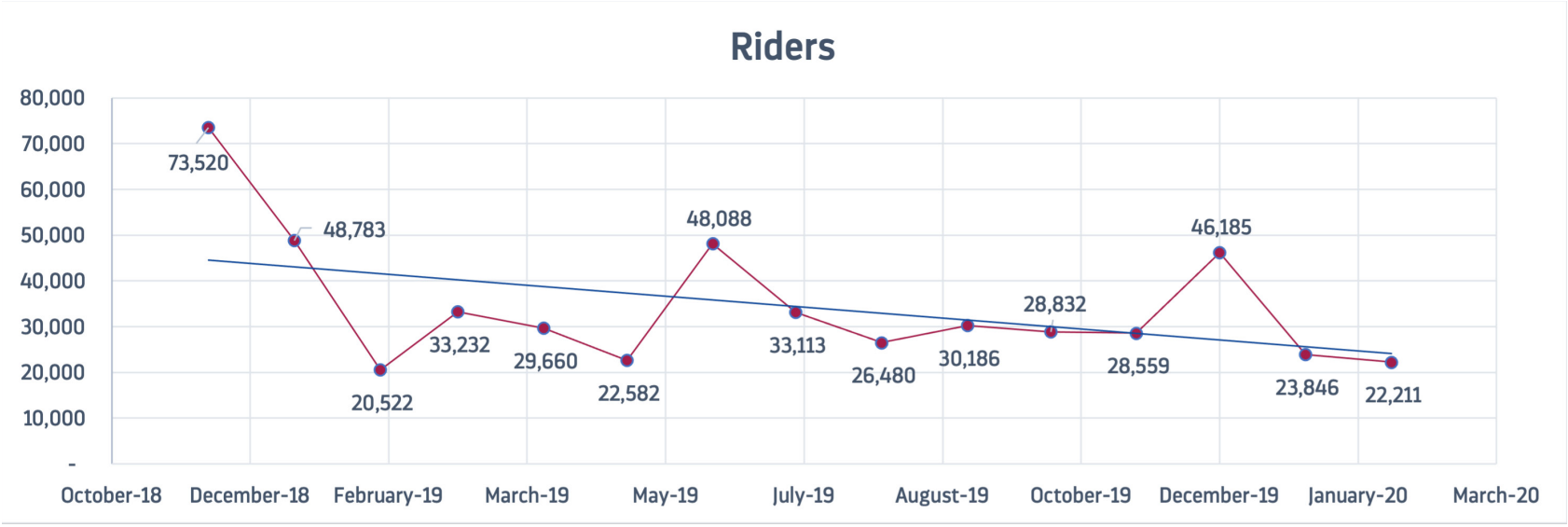
its own riders, one must look at a multitude of different groups of people. We must look at the makeup of the supervisory board of the Streetcar, the stops that are served by the Streetcar and the greater EMBARK system, and the businesses that are affected by the Streetcar.

PASSANGERS OF THE STREETCAR

When the Streetcar debuted in December of 2018, ridership was at an all-time high with Oklahoma City residents enjoying their well spent tax money. Within the first month open, the Streetcar system had 73,520 passengers use its routes and services; however, since its opening ridership has been slowly decreasing with some minor spikes. The spikes, however, are when the Token Transport App and EMBARK partner together to give free or discounted rides to the users. In theory, it seemed that Oklahoma City residents would reap the long-standing benefits of the Streetcar, but since the opening and the start of COVID-19, overall ridership has declined for the Oklahoma City Streetcar.

MODERN STREETCAR SUBCOMMITTEE

Under the MAPS3 Transit Committee, the Streetcar Subcommittee is served by Chairman Nathaniel Harding, Vice Chairman Zane Boatright,



Ridership Numbers from the Central Oklahoma Transportation and Parking Authority Board Meeting Minutes. Not all months are reported.

and seven (7) other board members. The subcommittee serves under the MAPS project rather than the EMBARK system. Their mission is to evaluate and utilize the funding given to them from the MAPS3 Committee and to (then) create and (now) maintain and run the Streetcar.

STREETCAR ROUTE

The Streetcar covers 4.8 miles of Midtown, Automobile Alley, the City Center, and Bricktown, with thirteen (13) stops on their Downtown route, and nine (9) stops on the Bricktown stop stops on the way (Route Map, 2021). The Bricktown stops are platform changes in which riders can transfer to their Downtown route with the Downtown loop also covering the same physical track as the Bricktown route. This meaning, one could take the Bricktown route if they were to stay in the south downtown area or get on the Downtown route all the way up north at Midtown and ride down to the Bricktown area.



Current Streetcar Route.

INVESTMENT IMPACT FROM THE GREATER OKC CHAMBER

The largest and most comprehensive study done on the Streetcar was completed by the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber. They looked at the impact of the streetcar route by retrieving data from three (3) blocks around the stops and route of the track. They found an additional $1.6 billion of public value and private investment from the project and

a net increase of 5,700 jobs in local businesses and organizations. Additionally, the private property value of that area has increased by 115% and over 80% on a square foot basis. Finally, the taxable value of the area has increased three times (3X) over the increase rate of the rest of the City. This all coming together by the business' opening up 4.2 million additional square feet with 1.9 million, 1 million, and 1.3 million square feet opening in the first (1st), second (2nd), and third (3rd) block surrounding the Streetcar, respectfully. (Oklahoma City Streetcar Investment Impact Analysis, 2018).

THE LOOPS OF THE PROJECT

Setbacks of the Streetcar

Despite its much-anticipated arrival and excitement, there are complaints and issues with Oklahoma City's Streetcars, which are now heightened because of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

THE COMPLAINTS BEFORE COVID-19

Besides its low ridership and unsanitary methods during the COVID-19 Pandemic, riders often complained before the Pandemic hit. Many riders were annoyed with the long wait times, the speed at which it carries its passengers, announcing



A Streetcar worker cleaning the grab bars.

stops, and that the Streetcar only travels in one direction before starting its route once more. Like any public transport passage, the Oklahoma City Streetcar has its faults. However, EMBARK has partnered with the Token Transit App for special deals and easily accessible fairs and passes for OKC residents. For 24 hours, the pass only costs $3, but for regular commuters who use the streetcar system, they can pay a flat rate monthly or yearly from the Token Transit App to help ease the burden

of commuting publicly and save money. With the easily accessible transportation moving through Downtown and stops every 15-18 minutes, small businesses profit through connection with their residents and the increased inner-city travel boosting morale among those living in Oklahoma City.

RIDING WITH COVID-19 IN MIND

According to The Oklahoman, "Streetcar workers say the Oklahoma City Streetcar system is plagued by inadequate security, poor safety measures and lax pandemic precautions" (Crum, 2020). The Streetcar system is still running despite its low ridership because the City does not receive any discount if it was discontinued. However, the EMBARK public information officer claims that there are reasons for accountability to keep it open and put the drivers at risk. Michael Scroggins said to NonDoc, "If you put a schedule out there, regardless of the mode of transportation involved, you have to make sure it is there because people come to rely on it" (Patterson, 2020).

COMPARING TO THE KC STREETCAR

As stated in the Executive Summary, the Kansas City Streetcar system is much more successful than the Oklahoma City version. They had five times (5X) as many riders as OKC did in 2019, with 2,228,992 riders. In fact, the Kansas City system had a one-day record of 19,559 riders, which is as still more than OKC had in months (Brake, 2020). Now this could be attributed to the system's free ridership. However, it is still good to examine systems similar to the project at hand in order to see how the Oklahoma City Streetcar Subcommittee could plan future actions.

DOWN THE TRACK
The Future of the Streetcar

EMBARK empowers transportation throughout the OKC metroplex, reaching into Norman to connect the University of Oklahoma's community and out-of-state residents to the beauty of Oklahoma City. Through EMBARK, Oklahoma City residents can access their Bike Sharing system; Ride Share system, Vanpool; the ferry of the Oklahoma, River Cruisers; and of course, the Oklahoma City Streetcar (EMBARK - Forward Together, 2021). Its innovative connectivity allows the flow of Oklahoma City to function to its fullest, allowing the success of other MAPS programs to come to light. MAPS 4 is set to expand OKC's quality for "life and job-creating initiatives." (OKC MAPS4).

SPECIAL EVENTS ON THE STREETCAR

With the 48 miles of tracks, OKC offered a Black History Month tour during February 2020. While it was widely popular, no other such tours have occurred since COVID-19; however, once the City can return to a somewhat normal way of life, other tours of OKC's history and districts would be widely popular among those visiting or new to the City.

AFTER...

Though it has made transportation easier amongst residents, the Streetcar could make drastic improvements on its rides. One facet the Streetcar system is lacking is accessibility to those hearing impaired. They must find easier ways to alert passengers that their stops are upcoming. Another way for OKC to improve their streetcar system is to implement actual safety protocols for the drivers and passengers of the Streetcar during the global Pandemic. Finally, the Oklahoma City Streetcar and the entire EMBARK system must make strides to a faster, cleaner, and safer way of travel and set a precedent for other public transportation systems in growing metroplexes.



The grand opening day of the Streetcar, presented by Mayor Holt.

TICKETS
References

About Us. (n.d.). OKC Streetcar. Retrieved March 2, 2021, from https://okcstreetcar.com/about/

Brake, M. (2020, January 27). Mass Transit Burns Energy, Attracts Few Riders. Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs; Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs. https://www.ocpathink.org/post/mass-transit-burns-energy-attracts-few-riders

Crum, W. (2020, October 7). OKC Streetcar Workers Press for Union. Oklahoman.com; GateHouse Media. https://oklahoman.com/article/5673333/okc-streetcar-workers-press-for-union

EMBARK - Forward Together. (2021). Embarkok.com. https://embarkok.com/

Estus, J., & Dean, B. (2009, December 9). Oklahoma City Voters Say "Yes" to MAPS 3 Proposal. Oklahoman; GateHouse Media. http://stage.newsok.com/article/3423715/oklahoma-city-voters-say-yes-to-maps-3-proposal?custom_click=masthead_topten

Historical Streetcar Routes OKC. (2020). ACOG. http://www.acogok.org/transportation-planning/maps-and-data/historical-streetcar-routes/

MAPS 4 | City of OKC. (n.d.). Www.okc.gov. https://www.okc.gov/government/maps-4

Oklahoma City Streetcar Investment Impact Analysis. (2018, July). Greater Oklahoma City Chamber. https://online.flippingbook.com/view/103629/2/

Patterson, M. (2020, May 15). OKC Streetcar Ridership Has Plunged Amid Pandemic. NonDoc; NonDoc Media. https://nondoc.com/2020/05/15/okc-streetcar-ridership-plunges-amid-pandemic/

Route Map. (2021). Oklahoma City Streetcar. https://okcstreetcar.com/ride-guide/route-map/

Images Used

Front Page: https://www.visitokc.com/blog/post/get-the-411-on-the-okc-streetcar/

Page Two: https://www.visitokc.com/event/free-okc-streetcar-rides/15676/

Page Three: https://www.acogok.org/transportation-planning/maps-and-data/historical-streetcar-routes/

Page Four, Data for Graph: Central Oklahoma Transportation and Parking Authority Board Meeting Minutes

Page Six: The OKC Streetcar's Facebook

Page Five: https://okcstreetcar.com/

Page Eight: The OKC Streetcar's Facebook

FIELD PROJECT TWO

By: Foster Hillis & Eileah Hale

Dr. Melody Rowlett
Urban Governement and Politics
P SC 3313-900

March 9th, 2021

The University of Oklahoma