

MAKING TRACKS

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Newsletter of the Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition

Spring 1999

High Profile, Low Floor Buses Urged for 8th St.

By William K. Guild

A small fleet of low floor "hybrid" buses now being evaluated by NYC Transit could provide a preview of the comfort and convenience in store for Village Crosstown riders once VCTC's goal of light rail transit is realized. At least one has already appeared in 8th St. crosstown service. If these diesel-electric vehicles could be deployed in sufficient numbers to enhance rather than reduce capacity on the M-8 line, VCTC would urge total conversion of the route in a high profile demonstration of low floor technology.

As described previously in the Fall, 1998 issue of *MAKING TRACKS*, a diesel-electric hybrid is propelled by motors drawing electricity generated mainly by a small diesel engine running at a relatively constant speed. Since a conventional diesel bus produces most of its pollutants during acceleration, the hybrid is far friendlier to the environment as well as more fuel efficient. Having ridden these vehicles both in revenue service and on test runs, we can attest to their smoother operation as well as their low floor convenience.

The Down Side of Low Floor Buses

With such improved passenger amenities—low floor and more comfortable ride—in a less polluting vehicle, why would we qualify our support for hybrid buses on the M-8 or any other route in the city? In a word, capacity. The low floor hybrids now being delivered accommodate only 32 seated passengers, instead of 40 as on conventional buses now in use, with space for standees similarly reduced. During peak hours, a 20% decrease in capacity is unacceptable, even on a relatively low volume route like the M-8.

The most important economic advantage of light rail transit (LRT) over buses is the greater passenger capacity of light rail vehicle (LRV) with a single operator, several times that of the largest buses. As we have indicated, LF-LRVs sacrifice little if any of this capacity (*MAKING TRACKS*, Winter 1999). In Europe and elsewhere, a number of cities have introduced low floor buses having nearly the same capacity as conventional models. But New York officials specified that our low floor buses must have stan-

Mulling over the Mulberry Mall: Some Lessons for 8th St.

By George Haikalis

Calm was recently restored between proponents and opponents of the Mulberry Mall in Little Italy. Now in its fourth year of operation, the dining mall on Mulberry St. has been a tremendous success as far as businesses are concerned. The inspiration of the Little Italy Chamber of Commerce, chaired by the very genetic Anne Campoccia, the mall was created by closing Mulberry Street to motor vehicular traffic. The many restaurants that this famous thoroughfare now spread out over the full width of the narrow sidewalks and the street becomes a pedestrian promenade. Improving the walking environment—a goal of our Village Crosstown Trolley proposal—has been an important tool in attracting tourists to an area thought by many to be in decline. The loss of front door access by diners arriving by car has not been a serious problem for most of the eating establishments that offer moderate priced, but tasty cuisine.

The mall is a part-time weekend event, running from Memorial Day to Columbus Day. Beginning at 6pm on Fridays, cars are banned until midnight on Sundays. Last year the Chamber began the event earlier in the season and included Thursday evenings as well. This precipitated a storm of protest from neighborhood residents who saw the mall as an intrusion into their

community. The newly created Little Italy Neighbors Assn., founded by Lillian Tozzi, began a campaign to end the mall. They argued that disabled residents had difficulty reaching their homes when the street was closed to car traffic and that others were inconvenienced by this loss of access. Underlying this protest was the fear that the Chamber was creating a "carnival" atmosphere that would lead to disorderly behavior and crime. Campoccia argued that what few abuses had occurred when the street was closed to traffic had been quickly dealt with, and that disabled people were allowed to drive in.

Lessons for the Village Crosstown Corridor

While not exactly comparable to VCTC's proposed Christopher St./ 8th St./St. Marks Place trolley corridor and pedestrian



- Michael Goodman
Oslo #12 tram stops at "Lille Frogner Alle." Tram (streetcar) lines form integral part of Norwegian capital's extensive transit network, which includes local trains, subways, buses and ferries serving virtually all of the city's 5-million residents. Tickets and passes, good on all transit modes, include single trip, 24-hour pass, seven-day pass and monthly pass. Passengers with passes may board rear car of two-car tram train, while others must board front car to buy ticket from operator. On many light rail systems, including most in the United States, tickets are available at stations and must be purchased before boarding. Roving inspectors ride the system and passengers found riding without valid tickets or passes are subject to heavy fines.

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On the Back: Village streets well-suited to light rail, says NYU Professor

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ard-size wheels and tires, requiring four enormous wheel wells projecting high into the vehicle, eliminating space for both seats and standees. So long as this wheel requirement is maintained, it will not be possible to substitute low floor for conventional buses on a one-to-one basis except on the most lightly-traveled routes. The Village Crosstown corridor is not in this category.

Convenience and Ridership

While recent M-8 ridership figures might suggest that the 8th St. crosstown is a lightly-traveled route, our own spot-checks show that, during peak hours, buses are typically quite crowded, reaching full capacity in bad weather or when there are service delays. Lower capacity vehicles, whatever their amenities, would mean customers left behind, and this is simply not acceptable, especially when buses are on headways (waiting time between buses) of 10 minutes or more.

Off-hours and weekends, when the Village Crosstown ought to be attracting large numbers of tourists and other visitors, buses are scheduled on headways of up to 30 minutes. Service disruptions and cancellations, which may double waiting times, are not infrequent and contribute to the M-8's reputation for unreliability.

Current M-8 schedules are operated with a maximum of six buses on the route at any one time. The same number of buses achieved 9 minute headways until 1996, with shorter "recovery" periods scheduled at the West St. and Ave. D terminals. By adding two additional vehicles, peak hour headways could be reduced to 7½ minutes and, even with smaller low floor buses, total seats and capacity on the route would actually increase by 6.7%. Increased frequencies would also make evening and weekend service more reliable and could be expected to attract new riders.

With only one step for passengers to negotiate instead of two, low floor buses have shorter dwell times and thus are able to maintain a schedule. Of course, with more convenient and comfortable vehicles on an improved schedule, the additional capacity might soon be filled by new riders, but this is precisely the object of the demonstration. Ultimately, the way to accommodate increased demand while decreasing operating costs is to convert the route to light rail, a long-range goal of VCTC.

A Demonstration Project

The best test of performance and customer reaction to low floor vehicles is not to commingle them with conventional vehicles and then interview riders. Rather, it is to convert an entire route to low floor vehicles and observe the effect on schedules and ridership. If the public is attracted by the new features and improved reliability, ridership should increase significantly, a strong indication of the latent demand for superior surface transit which only light rail can meet. The 8th St. crosstown is an excellent candidate for such a demonstration for several reasons.

First, sufficient low-floor diesel-electric buses are available for a full conversion of the route, even if two or more additional vehicles are assigned. While operating costs will rise, the increase will be less than on longer routes requiring even more vehicles to make up for the lower capacity on individual buses.

Second, although they are less polluting, diesel-electric hybrid vehicles use standard diesel fuel and thus can share depot facilities

with conventional diesel buses. Thus the M-8 route could continue to operate from the nearby Hudson Depot.

Third, by increasing vehicle frequency to a level sufficient to meet at least existing ridership levels, the demonstration can show whether current headways and general unreliability are driving away potential riders. We have often commented on the very high ridership of the 8th St. route prior to 1936, when streetcars were replaced by buses. During peak hours, cars often ran less than a minute apart. While such frequencies are not likely to be needed in the age of high-capacity LRVs, we believe that high ridership potential is still there if only the necessary service improvements are made.

Low-floor buses running on short headways have been very successful in Denver, serving the mile-long 16th Street Mall in the Mile High City. The route, a tree-lined auto-free promenade running between two major suburban bus terminals, crosses the light rail line midway, distributing commuters, shoppers and visitors among the office buildings, hotels, stores and tourist attractions of downtown Denver, including the state capitol, the U.S. Mint, Union Station and Coors Field, home of the Colorado Rockies. Denverites have learned not to run for these buses. If they miss one, the next is usually just a block away.

With its numerous intersecting subway and surface transit lines, especially between 4th and 7th Avenues, the Village Crosstown line could function very much like Denver's 16th Street Mall. While we do not urge one-minute headways, even for low floor buses, we do believe that significant improvement over present schedules would lead to a significant increase in ridership, with corresponding benefits to the community and to the city as a whole.

One Small Step

Conversion of the M-8 to low floor hybrid buses would be only one step toward VCTC's long-term goal of modern light rail transit in a largely auto-free corridor from river to river. From the customer's standpoint, the main attraction would be the ease of getting on and off, reducing dwell times and shortening trips, with a smoother ride as a bonus. For the Village and the wider community, conversion will mean cleaner air, reduced congestion and a valid demonstration of the attractiveness of public transit in it is made convenient and reliable.

The one major negative element of the proposal, reduce passenger capacity on individual vehicles, can be turned into an advantage if NYC Transit will simply add service to make up the difference. More frequent service and improved reliability will address the two most serious shortcomings of the M-8 today, giving at least some clue regarding latent demand for transit on the corridor, and giving customers a taste of low floor convenience.

Converting the M-8 to low floor diesel-electric buses on a one-for-one basis would be counter-productive, simply continuing the 63-year downward spiral of reduced service and lost ridership, and VCTC would categorically oppose such a move. By balancing the smaller-capacity vehicles with increased service, however, the demonstration can provide NYC Transit with data it needs to evaluate low floor buses, while improving service for Village customers and giving them a small taste of better things to come. □

VCTC On-line
www.villagetrolley.org

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promenade, the Mulberry Mall demonstrates that creating a more attractive walking environment does indeed draw more pedestrians. VCTC's corridor has a greater variety of retail businesses and with the trolley planned for the center of the street would be far less space to replicate the dining mall that works so successfully on Mulberry St. Only along St. Marks Place are sidewalks currently wide enough to accommodate sidewalk dining, and there are a number of popular restaurants lining the three-block stretch from Third Avenue to Avenue A. A car-free pedestrian promenade along St. Marks Place would encourage more restaurants to spread onto the sidewalk. Sidewalk cafés in particular become more desirable as the passing crowds grow. People sitting in the outdoor restaurants enjoy watching the people walk by and strollers appreciate the opportunity to gaze at the diners.

But even without cars on Christopher St. and 8th St. sidewalk space is too limited to permit more than modest amounts of seating in front of eating establishments. Other retail establishments along the street could also be afforded an opportunity to add modest storefront displays along the edge of the sidewalk. This would boost retail sales and attract more neighborhood-friendly stores. Using the widened sidewalks in a creative way while still not producing a congested street-fair shopping-bazaar atmosphere will be a challenge. If well designed, the trolley and pedestrian-only streets would produce an attractive alternative to the current hostile and polluted roadway environment, filled with a relatively small number of cruising cars many carelessly honking or blaring boom boxes.

Reinforcing the pedestrian-only street, and greatly enhancing its attractiveness, would be VCTC's Crosstown Trolley. The easy-on, easy-off low floor light rail transit vehicles, operating at frequent intervals, would provide the equivalent of a moving sidewalk for residents and visitors traveling fairly long distances to the subway or north-south buses. The trolley would link the various businesses along the route creating a powerful retail corridor that would rank among the city's most important sales generators and employment locations. More remote retail locations at the far east and west ends of the corridor, now struggling for customers, would get a special boost.

Little Italy could have its own trolley as well. Restoring the crosstown surface transit line that once operated on Grand St. has long been a goal of Lower East Side residents. VCTC Treasurer

William K. Guild has proposed a light rail line on this route linking the dense, transit-starved residential areas near the East River with subway stations at Chrystie St, Broadway, Sixth Avenue and Varick St.. Passing through Little Italy in a pedestrianized Grand Street trolley would reinforce the revitalization of this historic neighborhood.

The Village is not without its concerned and outspoken residents and VCTC recognizes that making change in NYC will not be easy. But the Mulberry Mall shows that careful planning and cooperation can achieve success.

Time to Survey and Save 8th St.'s "Hidden Treasure"

Now is the time for the Village Alliance Business Improvement District to act to save the historic streetcar infrastructure that lies buried just below the pavement on 8th St. between 6th Ave. and Broadway. Under the capable leadership of Ms Honi Klein the BID has successfully advanced plans for widening the sidewalks on 8th St. VCTC supports this much needed improvement as a first step toward our goal of a crosstown trolley operating in a pedestrian-only street. We urge the New York City Economic Development Corporation, the city agency responsible for advancing this project, to include a careful inventory of the streetcar trackage, as it begins its engineering study of the utility work and other construction needed to widen the sidewalks. VCTC believes that restoring and incorporating the streetcar tracks into the overall pavement plan for 8th St. will provide the Village with an important reminder of its colorful heritage.

George Haikalis

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