

Waiting for the Train in Jamaica Plain

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By Anastasia Goodstein

For the past nine years, Franklyn Salimbene has longed to hear the rumble of the trolley running past his Jamaica Plan home.

So much so, that the Bentley College law professor has become an expert on the history of his neighborhood rails and can rattle off forgotten statistics on MBTA ridership before it stopped running trolleys on the E line in 1985. "I never imagined my involvement and the amount of time I spend on this issue would be so great," he said.

Salimbene is one of many Jamaica Plan residents who desperately want the return of rail service to connect them to downtown and points beyond. Their hopes were buoyed last December when the state Legislature earmarked \$20 million to restore Arborway trolley line.

But that measure triggered a group of equally outspoken opponents who say trolleys are likely to clog streets, occupy already scarce parking spaces, and create a major safety hazard for bikers and pedestrians.

Jeffrey Ferris, who owns a bike shop on South Street, compared integrating trolleys with other traffic to "trying to mate a Chihuahua with a Doberman. The conception is difficult; the birth is painful; and the results are questionable."

The city has not committed itself to one side or the other. Both the city and state want neighborhood consensus on the logistics of restoration.

Bob Shortsleeve, who is against restoration, owns Pleasant Realty on Centre Street and thinks the return of the trolleys is unlikely. He has also studied all the facts and figures but still feels "it's like a lab experiment where everything seems perfect until they put it on the street – then it becomes a Frankenstein monster."

Chuck King, who owns Jamaica Cycle on Centre Street, feels the trolleys will be bad for business. "There are enough parking problems. Business is bad enough without enough street parking," he said. "Each trolley stop will take six to eight parking spaces per stop."

For the most part the dispute has been civil, played out in letters to the Jamaica Plan Gazette and debated by friends and neighbors, husbands and wives. Gazette editor Sandra Story asked people to put pen to paper in January and has run people's letters in every issue to date.

M.B. Fitzgerald wrote the Gazette in favor of restoration. "We are the people who bounce around the crowded buses... We stand outside in all kinds of weather after walking across Copley Square for the 39 bus."

But Leslie J. Wrixon, asked that the tracks be removed. She wrote, “Last fall I encountered the tracks, my bike tires flew out from under me and I ended up with some very serious injuries – a cracked kneecap among other things.”

In 1985, the MBTA replaced Arborway trolley service from Heath Street to Forest Hills with the Copley Square and Back Bay Station along South Huntington, Centre and South streets, all main arteries of Jamaica Plain. A year later, voters in the wards bordering the Arborway Line voted to bring the trolley back. That prompted an MBTA study, which concluded in 1987 that in order to restore the Arborway trolley line, new Green Line cars with low floors would have to be purchased and the tracks and the power system upgraded.

State Rep. John McDonough, who sponsored the measure resulting in the \$20 million expenditure, recognized the potential community split. “I’m in favor [of restoration], recognizing...this is not an unmixed blessing,” McDonough said. “But considering...feasible alternatives, restoration seems to make the most sense.”

To air the differences, Mayor Menino and City Transportation Commissioner Frank A. Tramontozzi held several meetings last year. Residents talked about issues, including parking on Centre Street, compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, the costs of restoration, and whether trolleys will block emergency vehicles.

Tramontozzi, who chaired the meetings, expressed the need for both a plan and further neighborhood input. “The issue is how to bring better service...and how this is done is open to discussion. The next step is for the mayor and me to come up with a plan and meet with the MBTA.”

Paul Dimaggio has been selling plants for years on Centre Street and drives to Jamaica Plain, but says he would rather take the trolley. “It’s always so congested with traffic on this street – kind of like Harvard Square.” He thinks Jamaica Plain has an identity crisis. “JP is a downtown area. It isn’t a bucolic suburb.”