

Ferry first, rail transit second

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The area's latest to-do list may look something like this:

Begin stateside preparations for the arrival of a high-speed, Toronto-bound ferry that promises to bring with it boatloads of tourism dollars and hometown job opportunities.

Check.

Figure out a way of getting these Canadian visitors from the vessel's Charlotte terminal into Greater Rochester without their having to board a rumbling, run-of-the-mill bus, or to self-navigate the often tortuous Lake Avenue traffic.

Oops.

"The only thing anyone's thought of for bringing people from off the fast ferry to the many sites that are uniquely Rochester are the RTS (Regional Transit Service) buses," said Christopher Burns, president and chief executive officer of Rochester Trolley & Rail Corporation, which has proposed running recreational trolley cars from the Lake Ontario port to both downtown's High Falls entertainment district and Irondequoit's Seabreeze Park. "And while some people will bring their cars with them on the ferry, that would only add to the God-awful snarl."

Burns and his partners met through community networking events and discovered they had some progressive ideas about travel and the future of Rochester. They joined forces earlier this year, conducting surveys in Charlotte, Seabreeze Park and High Falls, trying to gauge the public's interest in trolley service. Encouraged by the results, the group incorporated last month and is seeking funding for more formal feasibility studies.

"It is fascinating for me to see how virtually everyone who hears this idea likes it so much," said Carlos Mercado, the company's chief financial officer who, by day, is president of the Greece Chamber of Commerce.

Burns said a feasibility study could attract federal support for the project, garnering the grant money needed to construct trolley lines along existing railroad rights-of-way and to rehabilitate the Hojack Swing Bridge in Charlotte. The group is also soliciting partial status as a nonprofit; state law prohibits rail operators from enjoying the subsequent tax breaks, so Burns said the company's nonprofit side would simply own the assets, while the for-profit piece would run the trolley service.

"The idea is to use the money coming in to create jobs and to drive development and tourism," Burns said. "We view this as a community initiative, not a big-money scheme." Subsequent trolley routes would connect Rochester's colleges, airport, museums, public market and shopping centers, sports stadiums and arts neighborhoods, Burns said.

Mercado, who grew up in Philadelphia, where rail transit was the norm, said the options are limitless. "I rode a 1926 streetcar to school everyday," Mercado said. "I guess it's in my blood, and I am delighted to see a true resurgence of streetcars in America." Mercado said a feasibility study would take six months, "then the fight for federal funding begins." After that, construction of the line, installment of the overhead wires and renovation of the swing bride could begin – a process he said likely would take two

construction seasons. "This would be the same time it takes the ferry to build a solid patronage, so the timing is good," he said. The fast ferry is due to set sail next spring.

Burns, 28, said he and his partners are joined by an entrepreneurial spirit and have faith trolley bells will one day soon ring in Rochester. "This concept is attractive and safe," he said. "This could help Rochester's young people get out and experience a world outside of campus." And Mercado said our Canadian counterparts wouldn't be a hard sell, either.

"Torontonians enjoy North America's most highly-developed mass transit system and are used to riding in streetcars, subways, commuter trains and buses," he said. "Hopping off the ferry and getting on a transit vehicle is very natural for them."

For more information about Rochester Trolley & Rail, log onto its Web site at www.RochesterTrolley.com.