



File photo

The Charlotte & Ontario Beach trolley began offering rides in 1889 as seen above at Lake and Ridgeway avenues. Today's essayist argues that a return of rail-based trolley service to and from Charlotte would promote Rochester, provided the Hojack Swing Bridge remains

All aboard trolley proposal to give city economic lift



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I'm very encouraged to see progress on the fast ferry project, both locally and in Toronto, and the renewed interest in waterfront projects on the Genesee River. Add to that the *Democrat and Chronicle's* sage advice that we view ourselves as part of the Finger Lakes region (editorial, Aug. 25), and we have a real opportunity to leverage our region as an unmatched destination for visitors.

The efforts of the Rochester Trolley & Rail Corp. to bring a rail-based heritage trolley system to greater Rochester and eventually to the Finger Lakes is one of these exciting regional efforts. A key first link is connecting the Port of Rochester with downtown. However, some in the community have not yet fully embraced this exciting idea.

Bear in mind that visitors from Toronto already view trolleys as part of their daily life. Indeed, we plan first to connect Charlotte with downtown as a practical and attractive means of bringing visitors into the city, to show them the assets that are uniquely Rochester, such as the museum district, High Falls, Frontier Field and the East End.

From there, we're working to connect the Rochester Institute of Technology and the University of Rochester with downtown, as well as Nazareth and St. John Fisher colleges, and eventually even SUNY Brockport. This would be the means for students to be better integrated into our community.

If we expect students to stay in this area, it helps if they get to know it.

Perhaps more importantly, we're working to link greater Rochester with the Finger Lakes region, providing the means for fun and convenient travel among the recreational and other tourist destinations.

We have progressed nicely since we began six months ago, having met with most of the area politicians, having made community presentations and having incorporated as a New York State Railroad Corp. Our progress has been slowed, however, with respect to securing the critical first link to the community: the Hojack Swing Bridge in Charlotte. The swing bridge provides that pivotal link needed to reach dormant railroad rights-of-way leading into the city. Without this historically significant bridge, it is impossible to connect Charlotte with other points of interest in the community by rail, especially those beyond downtown, like the Finger Lakes area.

Charlotte residents applaud our efforts to enhance their community in a historically accurate way. Now, we are lining up the finances to do market and feasibility studies.

Curiously, some people still express the sentiment that the swing bridge should come down. This might have made sense before there was such a critical community use for the bridge. However, given the critical nature of providing a practical and attractive means of bringing visitors deeper into the community and eventually to the Finger Lakes, I believe this community owes itself the time to examine this new opportunity before destroying this crucial and historic link.

One reasonable concern asserted that the bridge must not interfere with

the operation of the fast ferry. However, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has confirmed that the swing bridge does not jeopardize the federal navigable channel, which was moved some 38 feet eastward to accommodate the ferry's size. The U.S. Coast Guard is also comfortable with our rail-based reuse of the bridge, and we have presented our plans to CATS as a means of enhancing the fast ferry's success.

Another challenge comes from plans to transform the abandoned rail rights-of-way into running and biking trails. Not only do we support these plans, but we offer an economic development opportunity that leverages these latent assets by sharing the space with the trail - an approach that has proven to be very successful in other cities.

We must not isolate Charlotte from downtown. It is a gem in our community, and the swing bridge is our only means to connect the two by rail.

Our first intended connection would bring trolley riders along Seneca Park and the zoo and would include a spectacular ride across the Genesee River Gorge on an existing trestle bridge.

Our heritage trolley operation is a critical enabler of the fast ferry project and redevelopment efforts in the port and across the community - including creating new jobs, improving mobility, and helping this area better capture tourism dollars. Right now, all the irreplaceable physical assets are in place to make this happen.

Let's work together as a community to do the right thing for greater Rochester and our future - before it is too late. To learn more about our efforts, visit www.RochesterTrolley.com.

Burns is president and CEO, Rochester Trolley and Rail Corp.