

Anacostia Streetcar Track Installation Begins

By James Hohmann
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Sunday, September 20, 2009

Crews are finally laying the tracks for the Anacostia streetcar line in Southeast Washington, causing delays through the end of the year on South Capitol Street but exciting boosters of the \$55 million project.

Track installation on Firth Sterling Avenue has begun, but the more visible installation of tracks at the South Capitol Street intersection is expected to start next week, the District's Department of Transportation said.

Through the end of this month, the track work will reduce traffic flow at the intersection to one lane in each direction, causing delays of five to 10 minutes. Other work will continue in that area through the end of the year.

The locations of several proposed stops along Howard Road and Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue SE are not set in stone. But officials overseeing the project hail the work as a significant step toward the first segment of what they hope will become a citywide system a decade from now.

"The tracks are actually going in," said Gabe Klein, the District's director of transportation. "As people see that, they'll realize we're getting closer than we've ever been."

The District had hoped to have streetcars running through Anacostia by the end of this year, but the project was beset by delays. The city purchased three red-and-gray trolleys almost three years ago for \$10 million. Those sit in a warehouse in the Czech Republic, where they were manufactured.

Streetcars, a form of light rail powered by overhead wires, share lanes with automobiles. Similar projects in Seattle and Portland are considered successes.

The initial 1 1/2-mile segment includes a platform near the Navy Annex at South Capitol Street and Firth Sterling Avenue. Another platform is by Barry Farms on Firth Sterling Avenue. A maintenance facility is being built near the end of the line on South Capitol Street to service and store the trolleys.

Klein said the District might have some part of the Anacostia line running before fall 2012.

Late last month, the District closed two intersections to cross-traffic along H Street NE to install tracks for a separate streetcar line. Klein said his department decided to lay that track because other work was going on in the area.

Engineers still need to find a way to power the cars on H Street and find places for the streetcars to turn around, said transportation spokesman John Lisle. They also need to find a place to store and maintain the cars on that line.

The transportation director has a grand vision for streetcar lines across the District that fills in the gaps where Metrorail doesn't run and resurrects an elaborate system that existed a century ago. Klein acknowledges that in the current fiscal climate, with massive shortfalls and short-term demands for money, it's hard to get it moving.

"I know we're in a downturn right now, but these are decade-long projects," Klein said. "If we never thought ahead when we were in a downturn, we'd never get anywhere. We're building upon a lot of the work that's already been done."