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Last Run for Edmonton Trolleys

May 1, 2009

in [2007-2010 Term](#), [Environment](#), [Transit](#)



This vintage Brill T-44 trolley is seen running in Belgravia in May of 1974 about two blocks from where I now live. (Courtesy of Angus McIntyre of Vancouver.)

Trolleys will be taken out of service for good at 5pm tomorrow under the auspices of a cost cutting measure approved by Council as part of our 2009 deficit fighting measures. Details of the last day of service, including a last run of the vintage Brill trolley, have been [posted on the city's website](#).

I did not support decommissioning the trolley system when Council voted on it in 2008, and I did not support the accelerated decommissioning either.

Cities around the world are taking a fresh look at electrifying portions of their rubber-tire transit systems. Under the right circumstances they are worth the premium cost. Clearly the way ETS had been operating trolleys for the past decade was not optimal, but the only option that was presented to council was to buy new low-floor buses to replace the aging high-floor models; this would merely have recreated a fundamentally inefficient system featuring improved reliability and accessibility.

Frustratingly, city administration never considered changing some of the other parameters that would affect the cost effectiveness and utility of the system, for instance most effective trolley systems maintain a ratio of around one bus per kilometer of overhead wire.

Vancouver has over 270 trolleys for just over 300km of wire, while Philadelphia has 38 trolley buses running under less than 50km of line. Edmonton was maintaining 127 km of line while proposing to run only 30-40 new buses. Running at a third the efficiency of industry best practice accounts for much of the exaggeration of the alleged cost premium. I argued then and maintain now that more buses or less wire might have yielded a cost effective system.



A modern low-floor trolley in service in Vancouver. Same chassis as diesel New Flyer ETS buses.

The key benefits of electrification are substantially lower noise on the street, and no street level emissions, which are both key to nurturing pedestrian friendly streetscapes. Having a trolley line on the street also gives a higher measure of certainty about continued service, which is positive for businesses and encourages redevelopment.

There are still emissions associated with our electricity (unlike Europe where nuclear is more prevalent, or Vancouver where hydro largely powers the trolley system) and it was said more than once that the tailpipe for electric transit is just an hour west of the city near the coal beds of Lake Wabamun. However, the life of a new trolley bus is 20-25 years, and if our electricity generation is still dominated by conventional coal in 2030 that's a big problem. I have hope that our electricity blend will shift over this period toward low and no carbon sources. City administration's case against trolleys assumed no change in the emissions profile of our electricity over time.

Electricity prices have been more stable historically than oil, which of course will power the replacement diesels over their 15-18 year lifespan. I should also note that administration did not allow for the longer projected lifespan of electric propulsion, nor account for the volatility over time of oil prices in preparing their case against electric propulsion.

I generally give the benefit of the doubt to our civil servants, but this is one instance where I have to confess that they clearly started with a firm position against trolleys, and worked backwards to construct an argument around that conclusion.

A thorough and open-minded analysis (a fair fight) might ultimately have convinced me that a trolley system was the wrong fit for Edmonton's future, but we didn't get that. This sad failure is why trolley

supporters, including a number of us on council, will mourn the decommissioning of this remarkable aspect of Edmonton history.

The only solace I can take is that this now clears the way to focus on developing LRT as the electric element of our transit system. Diesel buses are more flexible in terms of routing as well, compared to a trolley system with fixed routes, so the city is now free to engage in a long overdue redesign of the bus system to move people faster and better feed LRT.

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[eh May 1, 2009 at 12:19 pm](#)

Thanks for this post. I wasn't sure what to make of the decommissioning of trolley busses, and I appreciate the opportunity to get a pro-trolley bus perspective. Too bad it's too late to look at the street car option.

Pete [May 1, 2009 at 1:21 pm](#)

I can hardly wait for the the decommissioning of the mega multi million dollar high cost LRT. Just another reason why taxes get jacked like crazy in Edmonton.

[Adam Patterson May 1, 2009 at 1:44 pm](#)

How does the trolley cost more than the Diesel Buses? the electricity could be supplemented with solar/wind or what ever else they want. i'm not totally down with the Bio Diesel buses as you can purchase 3 standard Diesel buses for the same price.

M. Istvan [May 1, 2009 at 2:29 pm](#)

Hear Hear!! I agree with your sentiments. I feel the costs of the electric trackless trolley system are not balanced with the benefits. Less noise and other pollutants at street level are excellent reasons for any municipality to have a trolley system. Look at Portland, OR! They have a tremendous Transit system with LRT (with bicycle friendly cars), tracked electric trolley, and diesel busses.

I am frustrated that we are forging ahead with LRT for people who are likely to use transit anyway, rather than pushing West or NorthWest to St. Albert for people who have and use their cars for daily commuting. How can we get green if people keep shying away from the immediate cost with long term benefits!

SD [May 1, 2009 at 2:37 pm](#)

I'm going to have to disagree with you on this one, Councillor. Many supporters were justifying the higher costs of trolley maintenance or expansion under the auspices of a more environmentally friendly future when this, coupled with the current economics, didn't make sense. A pro-trolley stance would be more appropriate in an environment where clean electricity was prevalent, which you mentioned. The fact is, even if we are lucky enough to see the construction of nuclear power plants in Alberta, we will still be largely dependent on coal in 20 years. The present value of

adding more clean-diesel buses to the road is substantially higher than the future value of a cleaner trolley system.

Your stance is much more clear and justifiable than many trolley supporters I've heard, but I think Council made the right choice for the current time. Perhaps in 30 years, if a more environmentally-friendly power source is available, this can be readdressed to complement our LRT system at that time. Until then, let's scrap the trolleys and build up our feeder system into an expanding LRT. Keep up the great work on that front.

[Bryan Kulba May 1, 2009 at 4:18 pm](#)

It's too bad to see these go but it's more sentimentality than anything for me.

[Joe Austin May 2, 2009 at 8:26 am](#)

Thanks for the Blog Don. I have driven trolley coaches for about 20 of the 31 years I have been employed at ETS. Today is indeed a sad day. I gave up on driving these buses several years ago – the department in my view was unwilling to support them. On numerous occasions it appeared that the system was deliberately sabotaged by management, as an example; a mid day collision (in the downtown area) blocked all trolley traffic, the inspector in the Control Center (almost 40 years on the job) was unable or unwilling to suggest pushing us the 1/4 of a block to alternate wire to keep service -the result was an entire route was effectively out of service for several hours. Great customer service guys!

[Andrew Nauta May 12, 2009 at 9:55 am](#)

Dear Councilor Iveson,

I used to drive trolleys 15 years ago and decided to do so once again before they were decommissioned. At first I thought I had made an error but by the time I finished the 2 month shift, I was convinced Council had made a wrong decision. I also observed the dedication of the other trolley operators, an unexpected surprise. In my view, the combination of these operators and a well maintained trolley infrastructure would have in the long term overcome any deficit the diesel system may impose in the future. I only suggest that a portion of the overhead remain for sometime giving Council the option to re-commission the system if other propulsion systems do not meet the cost savings intended to remove the trolleys.

Andrew

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