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Streetcar loop in Downtown plan

By Mick Burke

RACINE - The clanging of streetcars - the real ones that ran on tracks - hasn't been heard here since 1940. But it's not so far-fetched to put one's ear to the ground and hear the sound again in a future Downtown Racine.

The Downtown Racine Refinement Plan, about halfway to completion, suggests a future streetcar loop of 2 miles and 12 stops.

As envisioned, it would run from the new transit center up State Street to Main, south to Sixth Street, west to Marquette Street and return to the transit center, which is now under construction.

George Crandall of Crandall Arambula, the firm that is revising the Downtown redevelopment plan it did in 1998, said there's one crucial difference between buses and streetcars. Because streetcars run on tracks, they stay where you put them.

"With buses, you have no assurances," he said. Route changes are fairly common.

"Developers want to get next to streetcar stops," Crandall said, but are reluctant to invest their money based on bus lines. That means urban areas grow from those nodes, so streetcars help foster urban growth.

"Those are not only convenient ... but a powerful incentive for developers to get next to them," Crandall said.

Streetcars are also dependable, said Crandall, whose own city, Portland, Ore., has downtown streetcars.

Streetcars and buses do have one thing in common: Both are largely funded by federal and state money.

Racine's streetcar era began in 1883, with the horse-drawn type, according to historian Dick Ammann of Racine Heritage Museum. They were run by the private Belle City Street Railway Co.

Horses gave way to electrified streetcars in 1892, Ammann said, with power supplied by overhead lines.

There were five full streetcar routes in Racine, based along State Street, Douglas Avenue, Sixth Street and Washington Avenue, Taylor Avenue and a southern line to the Case tractor plant.

The last phase of streetcars began in 1897, when Racine's streetcars became part of a larger interurban system.

Although the streetcar era ended a bit before the United States entered World War II, vestiges of the era still exist, out of sight. Ammann said most tracks were not ripped out but merely paved over. Sometimes when street work is being done, crews still find the buried tracks.

