

KENOSHA NEWS

A decade down the line

City celebrates 10 years of restored trolley service

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The Casolari family of Elk Grove Village, Ill., stepped off the green and white “Chicago” streetcar shortly before noon on Thursday.

“We had heard about the streetcars and the museums and we decided to run up here,” Lou Casolari said. “It was very nice and it kind of brought back memories when they used to call it the ‘Green Hornet’ in Chicago. This is beautiful.”

Thursday was the first time the Casolari family rode Kenosha’s streetcar line, exactly 10 years after the Kenosha residents and visitors got their first chance to ride the restored rails.

Kenosha’s streetcar system opened for service on June 17, 2000, traveling a two-mile, 15-minute loop through downtown and, at the time, newly built HarborPark area.

Streetcars ran in Kenosha from the turn of the 20th century until the 1950s, but had laid dormant for about 50 years before the 2000 return.

Jack Doyle, past chairman of the Kenosha Streetcar Society, said the last streetcars running near Kenosha was “Chicago” in the late 1950s. He and others sought to bring back streetcars and ended up finding a partner in Kenosha and former Kenosha Transit Director Joseph McCarthy.

“When they were building HarborPark they were asked if they could build something going through there,” Doyle said. “The timing was right because some streetcars just became available and were in great shape. The impossible all came together.”

Obtaining cars

The first two streetcars to operate that day were the maroon and cream “Toronto” car and green and gold “Cincinnati” cars. Three other cars — the green and white “Chicago,” red and cream “Pittsburgh” and orange and white “Johnstown/Kenosha” — joined several weeks later. All five cars are still in service for the city. All five streetcars were purchased from Toronto in 1997 through a \$132,000 federal grant.

Doyle said federal grants also helped place much of the infrastructure for the streetcar system.

“The grants were there because the government was very interested in streetcars at the time,” Doyle said.

Brad Preston, the city’s streetcar mechanic, said the cars do take some maintenance, such as the new door frames he built himself, but the original fleet has held up very well. A sixth streetcar was purchased by the city in 2007, but has not been put into service.

Thousands ride

Doyle said he had hoped that the system would be extended by this point — an expansion to the Uptown area

had been planned — but said the economic problems of recent years has slowed that effort.

“I thought, 10 years ago, that would have happened by now, but I wasn’t looking for the recession,” Doyle said. “If we count the recession, I’d say we’re doing pretty good.”

The numbers would seem to prove that out.

Ridership for the streetcar came in at 56,149 last year. In 2008, the system recorded 65,759 riders and 62,643 people rode the streetcars in 2007. Through May of this year, 14,087 people have rode on the streetcars, though the highest attendance comes during the summer months.

Worldwide interest

The last 10 years have also brought visits from streetcar enthusiasts from around the world and a number of officials from other cities interested in exploring streetcar systems.

“It’s one of the the top three tourist attractions in the city and it’s an intricate part of downtown,” Kenosha Transit Director Ron Iwen said. “We get people from France, Germany and the U.K. that come to see the streetcar. And there are people who stay here all day to see the streetcars.”

But Doyle said the vast majority of riders are simply curious about what they have heard about Kenosha’s new look at an old transportation method.

“About 90 percent of the people who ride are not rail fans, but they have heard about it,” Doyle said. “No one comes to Kenosha with their kids and family to ride a bus, but they’re coming to ride a streetcar.”

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