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# THE PLAIN DEALER

URBAN PLANNING

## Cleveland's rebound rides on the Health Line

Sunday, November 09, 2008

Cleveland, a city fighting to reverse decades of decline, has had a lousy fall so far this year. PNC Financial Services Group of Pittsburgh just bought National City Bank in a purchase engineered by the federal government. Eaton Corp. wants to move its headquarters to the suburbs. Neighborhoods are being hollowed out by the nationwide mortgage meltdown. Big development projects downtown and in the Flats have been frozen by the global credit crisis.

Amid the gloom, however, the city has just acquired an important new asset. The recently completed \$200 million rapid transit bus line on Euclid Avenue has turned the city's once-crumbling Main Street into a well-designed image of hope and renewal. From the fresh brick paving on downtown sidewalks to the sparkling glass-and-steel bus stations designed by architect Robert P. Madison of Cleveland, the project has dramatically improved the appearance of a street essential to the city's psyche.

Riding the Health Line -- as it has been named by the Cleveland Clinic and University Hospitals, which together will pay \$6.25 million over 25 years for the privilege -- is a curiously out-of-city experience.

A couple of years ago, Euclid Avenue was an eyesore complete with potholes, cracked paving and sunken sidewalks that filled with puddles during heavy rains. Now you board a shiny custom-designed bus, powered by a hybrid diesel-electric engine, and peer out the windows on a smartly revamped street planted with 1,500 trees and lined with miles of new sidewalks, public art, streetlights and landscaping. The RTA project has created a clean, crisp foreground that accentuates the majesty of the Romanesque and Gothic Revival churches that dot the avenue. It underscores the homey optimism of the new townhouses along the avenue east of East 79th Street. And it frames views of the downtown skyline in ways that produce a shiver of excitement.

Financed primarily by the state of Ohio and the federal government, the project shows how smart investments in mass transit and public space can help struggling cities turn themselves around. The project also is a reminder -- after the collapse of the I-35 bridge in Minneapolis and the catastrophic failure of levees in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina -- that America still has the ability to tackle high-quality, large-scale infrastructure projects with style. That's important at a moment in which the country has elected a new president who wants to invest heavily in urban infrastructure to create jobs, jump-start a sputtering economy and revitalize cities.

### Project a model for other cities

Just two weeks after the ribbon-cutting, the Euclid Corridor project is becoming a national model. Joseph Calabrese, director of the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority, which masterminded and built the bus line, said the agency has recently entertained large civic delegations from San Antonio and Nashville, Tenn. Other cities have ordered 50 of the hybrid vehicles designed especially for Cleveland by New Flyer of Winnipeg, Manitoba, and built in Saint Cloud, Minn. The RTA gets royalties from those orders, because it paid for research and development needed to create the vehicles.

The question now is whether we can allow ourselves to feel good about any of this. We should, but it's been hard. Critics complained about the two years of surgery on the avenue, which disrupted traffic and killed some small businesses. The work, however, was absolutely necessary; it replaced aging water and sewer lines and enabled the city to bury overhead wires.

Critics also called the Health Line a boondoggle, saying it will do little more than provide a marginal improvement over the former No. 6 bus line, which was already the city's most successful and heavily used route. The new line will cover the four miles between downtown and University Circle in 20 minutes, 10 minutes less than the old line.

It's true that when measured purely in cost efficiency per rider, the project didn't score high on tests required by the Federal Transit Administration as a condition for funding. But the project did meet those basic requirements. More important, though, it scored high on estimates of the economic development it would encourage along Euclid Avenue, which is flanked by two universities, two medical centers and a host of businesses and cultural institutions. Ultimately, the growth could push the line well beyond the 9,000 riders a day who used the old No. 6. Those riders will likely include a wide range of new residents and workers in the city's growing medical and educational sectors.

Earlier this year, in fact, the value of development projects recently completed, under way or planned along the avenue between Public Square and University Circle had reached \$4.3 billion. The entire amount couldn't be attributed specifically to the RTA project, but many developers said the impending completion of the line was a major factor in their decision to launch housing and office projects along the avenue.

Sadly, the recent banking crisis has stalled private commercial and residential development. Developer Doug Price, for example, can't get financing for his proposed \$200 million makeover of the vacant Ameritrust complex at East Ninth Street and Euclid Avenue. But the RTA project has set the stage for a rebound that should be far more robust than it would have been if Euclid Avenue had continued to rot.

#### **A solid example of design on a budget**

That said, the Health Line is downright modest in comparison to the stunning new airports, bridges and high-speed rail lines across China. It's not a photogenic masterpiece like the subway line built in Bilbao, Spain, in 1995 or the 2004 Millau Viaduct in France, both designed by Lord Norman Foster of England.

The project is also anything but lavish. The brick sidewalks and granite curbs on the downtown section don't extend beyond Playhouse Square. In University Circle, the avenue is paved in asphalt, cheaper than the foot-thick concrete traffic lanes built downtown and in Midtown. But the corner-cutting, though visible and lamentable, doesn't undermine the fundamental quality of the project as a solid example of urban design and city planning on a tight budget.

RTA originally conceived the project in the 1980s as the "Dual Hub" light-rail line, but found in the 1990s that a rail line would have cost \$700 million to \$800 million. Inspired by the rapid bus system in Curitiba, Brazil, RTA redesigned the Euclid Avenue project to achieve the speed and high-class feel of light rail at the lower cost of a bus line. The core section of the line, from Public Square to University Circle, has center median stations on raised platforms designed to enable riders to step directly onto buses, as if they were rail cars. An innovative precision docking system makes it easy to align the buses with precise spots on the platforms, so riders know where to queue.

The 34 stations along the line are smartly tailored gems. They have a light, transparent feel that makes them look both elegant and safe. They complement the architecture of nearby buildings, rather than obscure views. Less noticeable are the ingenious ways in which landscape architects from Sasaki Associates in Watertown, Mass., redesigned the avenue from building face to building face to include 5-foot-wide bicycle paths and tapering islands with flower beds at the bus stations.

Squeezing all of that into a relatively narrow right-of-way, without noticeably shrinking sidewalks, took ingenuity and flexibility. RTA initially resisted the idea of bike lanes, but wisely included them after strong advocacy by the administration of former Mayor Jane Campbell.

Public art along the line, including tree grates and stainless-steel trash cans incised with typographical characters, looks both bland and cautious, as if designed to avoid offending anyone. But here, too, there are bright spots: The Seattle landscape architecture firm of Murase Associates designed intriguing and enigmatic earthworks in University Circle, made of rough blocks of Berea sandstone. They resemble strange geological outcrops emerging from the earth in an unexpected place.

Having added a sparkling new amenity to Cleveland, RTA, the city and local community-development organizations will have to do an excellent job maintaining the Health Line, lest it become a new symbol of decay. The banged and rusting new trash cans along the line, for example, should be repaired or replaced ASAP. Quibbles aside, the Health Line is, overall, something that should make Clevelanders feel proud. It provides a strong physical and aesthetic link between the two most important economic engines in the region -- downtown and University Circle.

The city now needs other major investments, including a new shipping port and a better link from University Circle to the interstate highway system. But with the Euclid Avenue project finished, the city is far, far better off than it would have been without it.

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