

TRACK II

Kenosha – Revisited

By Gary Landrio

RAIL Magazine, in its Premier issue, looked at streetcars in Kenosha, Wisconsin in an article titled, “The Way it Was – and Might Be Again.” Now in RAIL’s 10th issue, it is a good time to revisit this project and see if the promise described then is being fulfilled.

Located midway between Chicago and Milwaukee and situated on the shore of Lake Michigan, Kenosha is a community of 92,000. Since the turn of the 20th century, it has had a manufacturing-dominated economy. In 1986, the Chrysler Corporation closed two major automobile assembly plants in Kenosha, including

the 100-year-old lakefront plant. The site was demolished and remediated but the destruction was more than just physical. With the plant closings, about 5,300 employees lost their jobs. The local unemployment rate immediately doubled.

But Kenosha persevered and what followed was a sequence of events and decisions that changed the community’s lakefront, downtown and the character of the city itself. The city developed the 525-slip public Southport Marina in 1991 and took ownership of the former plant site. Five years later, city officials enlisted the aid of an Urban Land Institute Advisory Panel that recommended mixed-use development including

housing, retail, recreation and public uses.

The result was a development plan that clearly created a special place and one that could be constructed within a budget affordable to the community. Early in 1997 the plan was presented, consensus was achieved and approval was gained. The plan and eventually the area, was called *HarborPark* and streetcars played an instrumental role in its development and success.

Stone Consulting and Design was selected by the city as the engineering firm to help bring streetcars back to Kenosha after their more than 60-year absence. Our practical implementation approach and insistence on simple and low-cost options dovetailed nicely with the city’s plan.

The city reintroduced streetcars in order to integrate the *HarborPark*



neighborhood into the community and offer a high-profile, identifiable route, providing connections to businesses, government, schools, the new Kenosha Public Museum, shopping, commuter rail, bus transportation and area activities in the downtown and on the lakefront. For equipment, the city used Presidential Conference Commission (PCC) 1936 designed streetcars that were among the last to be made in North America at the Canadian Car & Foundry Company in 1951. The five cars that Kenosha purchased for \$119,000 had been in use in Toronto, Ontario until 1995, when they were replaced with new, light-rail vehicles.

For Kenosha service, installation of rebuilt trucks and motors under the car bodies permits the use of normal railroad engineering standards. The refurbished cars cost about \$68,000 each. Part of the reconditioning process was to install a lift at the center door so those passengers who cannot climb the steps, or are in wheelchairs, can board the streetcars. The cars are outfitted to secure wheelchairs while the cars are in operation.

Kenosha Transportation Director, the late Joe McCarthy, a leading advocate of streetcar-based transportation-oriented development, worked with federal, state and city programs to develop nearly \$3.5 million in grants to purchase the streetcars and construct a streetcar barn and the operating system. Because the streetcar system was so well integrated into the new *HarborPark* design, the City was able to dovetail expenses associated with both *HarborPark* and the

streetcar system together. In total less than \$5 million was required to construct Kenosha's two-mile streetcar system.

Today, *HarborPark* is a mixed-use commercial and residential development. Specialty stores, bistros and wine bars continue to open and thrive and people who had never before thought of making Kenosha a place of residence now call it home. The streetcar system has helped to provide a nostalgic charm and a transportation option into what is now a pedestrian-friendly area. The approach eliminated wasteful parking and resulted in more green space and higher density/higher valued development.

In addition, the condominiums and townhouses in *HarborPark* are attracting commuters from Chicago who can hop on the METRA from the streetcars and leave the driving to someone else on their trip to work. These commuters find great appeal living in an affordable, friendly community that offers great amenities like the lakefront without the hassles or costs of the big city.

The streetcars have been instrumental in supporting the revitalization of downtown Kenosha and have helped to bring businesses, residents and tourists to the area. The goal was to be a catalyst for redevelopment. The reality is that \$50 to \$60 million of development has already occurred. Almost all the 342 condominiums in *HarborPark* are selling as fast as they're being built. The convenience of streetcar service eliminates the need to leave the downtown and everything it has to offer – especially its lakefront.

And city planners are taking note. The American Planning Association's *Planning* magazine recently summarized: "Perhaps the most surprising success story is Kenosha, Wisconsin, where a streetcar line has spurred redevelopment of a 70-acre brown-field in the heart of downtown. The city acquired the property and built the two-mile-long line to connect the site with an end-of-the-line station for the Metra commuter rail system, which runs to Chicago."

Among the several attractions in the *HarborPlace* development is the *Harbor MarketPlace* a popular open air market that ties together the market place and town square.

Even more exciting are the projects now in development. Another \$50 to \$100 million in new commercial and residential construction is now in the works. These include planning for a 12-story building and a Civil War Museum.

We at Stone Consulting feel strongly that there are great opportunities around the country for the Kenosha experience to be duplicated. Too often good projects die a premature death due to inflated conceptual cost estimates. Kenosha has learned to take the best of its past – its streetcars – and ride them into a prosperous future. 