

## **A Street Car They Desire: San Diegans Consider the Trolley**

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Public mass transit has long been a fixture in many large metropolitan areas. A significant number of east coast city dwellers have used subways and trains to get around for decades. In contrast, San Diego's trolley system is relatively new. Though the city had trolleys at the turn of the century, service stopped in 1949 only to be restarted in 1981.

So what do county residents think of the trolley as a means to get around, especially given a new line? The latest installment of the KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll shows that while few county residents regularly ride the trolley, most are satisfied with the system and it enjoys widespread support. An enormous 80% think the trolley is a good civic investment.

A little over one-third say the new extension connecting Mission Valley with the eastern suburbs of La Mesa, El Cajon, and Santee will actually increase the likelihood they will use the system. However, almost 60% say the extension will make no difference at all. Lastly, if they could be transportation planners, 40% say they would want to add a line to the San Diego International Airport.

### **Trolley Ridership**

The survey results make it crystal clear that very few San Diegans commute to work via the trolley. Only one out of a hundred ride it on a daily basis. Another 5% could be considered fairly regular riders as they take it once or twice each week. On the flip side more than 40% have *never* boarded the trolley and an additional 17% take it less than once per year. For most San Diegans the trolley is, therefore, a largely unused resource.

Several factors contribute to ridership or the lack thereof. There is a nexus between where trolley stations are located and where a resident lives. Folks living in the city of San Diego are the most frequent trolley riders followed by those in the south suburbs (National City, Chula Vista, and Lemon Grove, etc.) and the east suburbs (El Cajon, La Mesa, and Santee, etc.). About two-thirds in these areas where the trolley runs have taken it. On the other hand, a majority of residents in the county's northern and eastern portions have never used the system. But despite the fact that ridership frequently comes down to "location, location, location" the trolley is mainly a novelty even in those regions served by the trolley. Most trolley riders in the portions of the county served by the system are in the once-per-month to once-per-year group.

Ridership is also significantly related to a person's age. The survey finds that the vast majority of the elderly (75 and older) have never ridden the trolley while only a quarter of 25 to 34 year olds and a little more than a third of 35 to 44 year olds have not boarded it. Aversion to the trolley among those in the top age bracket may relate to safety concerns or the possibility that the trolley may not go where seniors want. It is important to note that no age group rides the trolley frequently. Adults under 25 are the closest as 14% ride at least once a week.

Income also determines ridership to some extent, though not in the way that many would expect. Mass transit is often portrayed as benefiting the economically disadvantaged who may not have the ability to pay for a car and its upkeep. Therefore the perception may be that the poor are the most frequent trolley users. This survey finds that is not the case. Instead the most frequent riders are those with annual incomes between \$60,000 and \$80,000. In fact, folks making less than \$20,000 (as well as those making more than \$150,000) are the least likely to ride the trolley at all. The implication is that middle-income residents more often benefit from trolley subsidies.

Interestingly, ideology also plays a slight but significant role in ridership, as very conservative residents seem to avoid the trolley. Half have never ridden one and none (in our sample) take the trolley on a weekly basis. This could be linked to larger political motivations as many conservatives view mass transit as inefficient and a waste of taxpayer dollars.

Females appear to be less comfortable with the trolley. Sixty-two percent either never ride or take it only rarely. As with seniors, this could be tied to larger concerns about safety. April's KPBS/Competitive Edge Research poll found that women were more likely to avoid certain communities for safety reasons.

### **Trolley System Satisfaction: To Ride it is to Like it**

While the county's residents may not regularly ride the trolley, that does not stop them giving it the thumbs up. Over half hold positive impressions versus 18% who have a negative impression. Another 29% are unsure what grade to give it.

In good news for officials of the Metropolitan Transit System (MTS, the group responsible for the trolley) overwhelming numbers of core customers give the trolley good or excellent ratings. In fact, about half who frequent the trolley once a month or more give it their highest rating. The evaluations are less robust among those who ride once or twice per year, but even here a healthy 78% give the trolley good or excellent marks. Those numbers drop a bit among those who ride it less than once per year and 26% in this group give the trolley negative marks. It may be that those folks endured a bad experience which now stops them from giving the trolley another try. Not that non-riders universally slag the trolley, but they give the system its worst grades which is evidence of some prejudice. A quarter of those who have never taken the trolley rate it highly but 13% rate it negatively and 62% are unsure what grade to give the system.

Geographically, north city residents (north of Interstate 8 but within the San Diego city limits) are less satisfied with the trolley than their counterparts from around the county. Less than half of north city residents give the trolley a positive satisfaction score with only 12% rating it as excellent. It is certainly plausible that north city residents are less thrilled with the trolley since they subsidize it while not reaping the benefits. Positive evaluations climb south of Interstate 8 with 54% giving it a positive rating; 31% excellent. In the south suburbs and east suburbs -- also higher ridership areas -- ratings climb to 67% positive in the east suburbs and 77% in the south suburbs. The northern portions of the county and east county rate the trolley more positively than not, but, not surprisingly, substantial numbers are unsure what grade to give it.

Income is another factor driving satisfaction. Lower income earners tend to be enthusiastic while those making more than \$80,000 yearly are a little less so.

### **A Good Use of Taxpayer Dollars**

County residents overwhelmingly believe the trolley is a good investment. Over 80% side with the opinion that the trolley gives many people an environmentally friendly alternative to driving. Meanwhile, only 13% feel it "is a bad investment because taxpayers subsidize it and relatively few people ride it." Affection for the trolley, therefore, goes well beyond performance.

Even most non-riders believe the trolley is a civic good that deserves funding and this viewpoint strengthens as use of the system increases. Over 90% of residents who ride the trolley at least once a month rate it as a good investment; 80% strongly believe that.

Not surprisingly, conservatives are more likely than liberals to agree with the negative policy statement. But, even here, an astonishing 69% of very conservative residents think the trolley is a good investment!

Age is again a significant player. Younger adults rate the investment more positively than seniors, although it should be noted that over three-quarters of adults over the age of 65 still think the trolley is a good investment. This is not a surprise in that seniors often invoke a higher threshold when it comes to rating government services.

One surprise is that women are more likely to consider the trolley a good investment than men. Does this reflect the car-centric male worldview or simply a gender gap related to public funding?

### **Who's Moved by New Trolley Line?**

As the MTS opens its new extension connecting Mission Valley with the east suburban cities of La Mesa, El Cajon, and Santee, the survey asks whether the new line would boost usage. Slightly more than a third said it would increase their use of the trolley, 12% think it greatly increases the likelihood.

The survey results show the new line will increase the system's utility for current riders. Most monthly-or-more riders say their likelihood of using the system increases with the new extension. But what makes transit officials excited is that 6% of those who have never taken the trolley, 9% of those who rarely ride it and 15% of those who take it once or twice per year say the new line *greatly* increases their chances of using the system. These results must be discounted for the "wishful thinking" in which some respondents are engaging. However, if even 3% of those who currently do not ride the trolley now begin to do so, that would mean roughly another 25,000 riders entering the system.

Not surprisingly, geography also plays a role. Those in the east suburban communities and those in the city of San Diego south of Interstate 8 say that the new extension will increase their use of the trolley. This is not surprise since the

new extension will increase the connectivity with the MTS trolley system for these two communities.

Young adults -- those under the age of 35 -- are also more likely to use the trolley due to the new line. Half those between the ages of 25 to 34 and 60% of young adults between the ages of 18 to 24 think they will use the trolley system more with the July 2005 expansion. This clearly suggests that the SDSU connection should have significant effect on both parking and traffic congestion at the school's mesa top location. Additionally, the new line will give many younger residents an additional way to access downtown with all of its entertainment opportunities.

Those who are paying most attention to San Diego issues and politics are more likely to ride the trolley with the new extension. Due to their connectedness with civic issues, these folks are much more aware of the new link and have thought about how it will benefit them.

Lastly, income again plays a role. Those who make less than \$40,000 think the new line will increase their use. It may be that the new line's promise of quicker trips will finally make the trolley a viable alternative for commuting back and forth to lower-paying jobs. In any event, it looks like transit planners may be bringing in the target market of the working poor with the latest extension.

### **The Next Extension: Where to Now?**

The survey also asked San Diegans about five additional potential destinations for the trolley. The favorite is the San Diego International Airport with 40% of respondents favoring it. La Jolla/UCSD draws the support of 14% of residents; Balboa Park gets the support of 11%; UTC/Sorrento Valley gets the support of 10%; and a Sea World/Mission Beach destination receives support from 8%. In another sign of the trolley system's hold on San Diego, a measly 4% say that they would not want to build another trolley line.

Two groups comprise the backbone of support for the airport trolley line expansion. The first are those who think the trolley is a good investment. For them the airport is a high value target and they want to see it included.

The second is income. Half of those in households earning in excess of \$100,000 annually want the trolley going to the airport. These folks may see the trolley as an economic development tool and as a way to ease congestion around Lindbergh Field. More directly, higher income earners are simply more likely to use the airport while lower income earners are not. Lower income folks are split between the “high cost” airport location and “free” destinations like Balboa Park and UCSD/La Jolla.

Along similar lines, younger adults gravitate a bit more to the idea of a link to La Jolla and UCSD. As with their views on the SDSU expansion younger residents may view this as a way to open up more educational opportunities and/or get them around the parking problems that exist at San Diego’s other big state university. But even among them, the airport is the most often preferred extension destination. Younger adults are also the only group to totally reject the idea not constructing another trolley line.

## **Conclusion**

San Diego County residents are big fans of their trolley. There is no escaping the conclusion that the trolley is a smashing public relations hit. Any politician would love to enjoy similar support. What is amazing about these numbers is that the vast majority of San Diegans do not regularly ride the trolley they so vigorously support. This harkens back to the desire expressed in a previous KPBS/Competitive Edge Poll that San Diegans yearn to be recognized as a world-class city and residents view a good mass transit system as one symbol of that.

What makes this more interesting is that, as repeatedly documented by our polling, this county continues to be conservative cul-de-sac. That support for the trolley extends even to very conservative residents, who should be a natural hotbed of dissent, shows the overwhelming extent of the trolley's pull. The charming red cars even seduce those who normally oppose anything subsidized by taxpayers.

Another interesting finding is the fact that trolley ridership numbers in San Diego County are driven not by low-income residents but rather by middle-income residents. Could this be a byproduct of Petco Park which is both a trolley destination as well as a draw for all but low-income residents?

It appears that transportation planners are onto something with the trolley expansion through the college area. It looks like it will encourage daily commuting among less affluent residents in the east suburbs and south city. And, even if it makes a small dent in the large percentage of non-riders, the extension is likely to be seen as a success in getting cars off the freeway.

Finally, there seems to be considerable openness to running a trolley line to the San Diego International Airport. As the Regional Airport Authority works through the next steps in siting a new airport (or expanding the existing one) they are well advised to collaborate with MTS to include trolley service. It is not often that widespread public support is registered for a project not even on the drawing board.