October 2017

Streetcar Desires: The Death of the Arlington Streetcar and the Cultural Politics of Smart Growth Development

Timothy A. Gibson
George Mason University, tgibson1@gmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cpo

Part of the Critical and Cultural Studies Commons, Rhetoric Commons, Social Influence and Political Communication Commons, and the Urban Studies and Planning Commons

Abstract

In 2014, Arlington County—an affluent suburb of Washington, DC—became embroiled in a bitter political debate over a proposed streetcar line on Columbia Pike, a street that traverses some of the County's last remaining working-class and new immigrant neighborhoods. Viewed alternatively as vanguard for gentrification, a symbol of sustainable development, and a big government boondoggle, the proposed streetcar brought to the surface ideological and class antagonisms which are typically muted in Arlington's broadly liberal-progressive political culture. Drawing on comments posted on a local news blog as well as interviews with advocates, this paper examines the streetcar debate through the lens of Stuart Hall's theory of articulation and Janice Radway's metaphor of "ideological seams." In particular, the paper explores how streetcar opponents wove together an unlikely rhetorical fabric, intertwining fears of gentrification, a critique of "big government," and a rearguard defense of suburban automobility. A concluding section discusses what the death of the Arlington Streetcar can reveal about the cultural politics of smart growth development and sustainable urban planning.

Jay Fisette, the Chair of the Arlington County (VA) Board, stood chastened and downbeat as he addressed reporters in a hastily arranged press conference in early November 2014. Those in attendance likely had a guess about what was coming next: the cancellation of the Arlington Streetcar.[1] That it would end this way was, in many respects, quite surprising. Arlington County is perhaps the most reliably liberal and progressive jurisdiction in Virginia, with a long history of supporting public investments in schools, parks, and transit. In fact, voters had approved every single bond measure put before them during the previous 30 years.[2] Further, Arlingtonians have long been the most enthusiastic users of public transit in Virginia, with an astonishing 40 percent of *all transit trips in the Commonwealth* beginning or ending in Arlington.[3] With this legacy of support for transit alternatives and public investment, the Arlington Streetcar seemed for years like a political slam dunk.

Obviously not. The moment Fisette announced that he and fellow Board member Mary Hynes—both long-term streetcar supporters—had abandoned the project, the Arlington Streetcar was dead. So what happened? One answer is deceptively simple: the Board's political calculus changed when John Vihstadt – a life-long Republican and fierce streetcar opponent – won a seat on the Council. Given that the 2014 Board election campaign was widely viewed as a referendum on the project (with Vihstadt facing off against a streetcar supporter), it's perhaps not surprising that, when Vihstadt won a strong victory, the remaining streetcar supporters on the Board—interestingly, still a majority of the Board—would be feeling the heat. It wouldn't be the first time that politicians simply bent to the political winds.

But the election itself raised more questions than answers. How did a project that quietly wound its way through the planning process for a decade suddenly become the center of a fierce public debate? How did streetcar opponents manage to convince voters who had for generations supported public transit investments to turn on the most significant transit project in Arlington in 30 years?

These are clearly questions of policy, focusing on how a particular policy outcome was achieved in a contested political field. But these are also questions of

---

[1] Patricia Sullivan and Antonio Olivo, "Arlington Officials to Halt Work on Columbia Pike, Crystal City Streetcar Projects," *Washington Post*, November 18, 2014.

[2] Patricia Sullivan, "Bond Decisions for Arlington Voters," *Washington Post*, October 13, 2012.

[3] Rachel Kaufman, "Arlington's Streetcar is Dead. Now what?" *Next City* (blog), https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/arlington-streetcar-failure-future

meaning and culture.[4] As Stuart Hall argues, the achievement of policy objectives, such as killing the Arlington Streetcar, depends upon waging successful struggles on multiple and interlocked terrains all at once.[5] Political actors with policy ambitions must organize alliances, marshal economic resources, *and* engage in the labor of cultural production and circulation. Issues must be framed and rhetorical strategies selected.[6] Compelling messages and images must then be crafted, honed, and circulated in a new media ecosystem where traditional media and digital networking intertwine.[7] And all of this cultural labor is devoted to the uncertain task of stitching together the kinds of temporary and unstable political alliances that are necessary for policy success. Examining the case of the Arlington Streetcar can therefore reveal not merely the causes of a single project's demise but more broadly how processes of policy-making are thoroughly *cultural* and bound tightly with the production and circulation of meaning.

In addition, the case of the Arlington Streetcar may also illuminate the rhetorical and cultural challenges faced by advocates of sustainable urban development. This was certainly the case within the smart growth planning community in Arlington and DC, who collectively viewed the death of the Arlington Streetcar with no small amount of concern.[8] For smart growth planners, if one thing is certain, it is that urban sprawl—a vast, low-density, car-dependent landscape—is a carbon-spewing luxury humanity can no longer afford.[9] To fight sprawl, smart growth planners have therefore focused not only on designing more sustainable (i.e., higher density, mixed-use, walkable) urban communities but also on applying innovations in urban transportation, *beyond* the automobile. In Arlington, the streetcar was therefore meant to be an efficient, high-capacity way

---

[4] Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1978/2013).

[5] Stuart Hall, "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees." *Journal of Communication* Inquiry 10, no. 2 (1986): 28-44.

[6] Robert Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public opinion, and US Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[7] Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and* Politics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[8] David Alpert, "Is 'the GGW Agenda Dead? No, but It's Hard to Build Transit." *Greater Greater Washington* (blog), February 12, 2015. https://ggwash.org/view/37289/is-the-ggw-agenda-dead-no-but-its-hard-to-build-transit. See also, Rachel Kaufman, "Arlington's streetcar is dead. Now what?" *Next City* (blog), https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/arlington-streetcar-failure-future

[9] Robert Freilich, Robert Sitkowski, and Set Mennillo, *From Sprawl to Sustainability: Smart Growth, New Urbanism, Green Development, and Renewable Energy* (Chicago: American Bar Association, 2010).

to support the redevelopment of an existing car-oriented, low-density streetscape into a higher-density, walkable, transit-oriented environment, thus absorbing some of the projected regional population growth in a more sustainable, lower-carbon form. And yet now the streetcar was dead. More alarmingly, if smart growth principles and transit-oriented development could fail in *Arlington*—a recipient of the EPA's Smart Growth Award[10]—it would face even stronger headwinds elsewhere. To this end, the conclusion of this article examines some of the rhetorical insights advocates might take away from the death of the Arlington Streetcar.

So like all good mysteries, we have a corpse—the streetcar—and a series of intriguing research questions. Why did rail transit suddenly become controversial in Arlington despite the County's previous embrace of transit-oriented development? What rhetorical strategies did streetcar opponents use in their bid to kill the project? Further, given that the Arlington Streetcar was slated to run down Columbia Pike—arguably Arlington's last zone of affordable living for working-class residents and new immigrant communities—how did opponents' rhetoric connect with class politics in Arlington and ongoing concerns about affordable housing and gentrification? And finally, how can advocates who wish to move urban planning beyond the automobile learn from the political failure of transit in Virginia's most liberal-progressive locality?

To explore these questions, this paper draws on Stuart Hall's theory of articulation and Janice Radway's concept of "ideological seams" in order to examine the political rhetoric mobilized within the comment fields of a local news blog, ARLNow.com. What we will discover is that streetcar opponents were able to stitch together a disparate ideological coalition, suturing those who feared and rejected the ongoing processes of gentrification and displacement in Arlington (but who otherwise were supportive of or at least agnostic about higher-density, "walkable" development) with another group of residents who were eager to defend a residual, quasi-libertarian culture of low-density, suburban automobility. Together, this unlikely coalition marshalled enough strength to defeat an establishment consensus on the value and promise of smart growth planning principles and higher-density, transit-oriented development.

Beginning with a short history of the Arlington Streetcar proposal and a discussion of the study's theoretical framework and methodology, the paper turns to the debate itself, focusing on the political rhetoric and imagery of streetcar opponents, as captured in blog comment fields and as discussed in interviews with

---

[10] "Smart Growth: 2002 National Award for Smart Growth Achievement Booklet," *Environmental Protection Agency* (website). Accessed May 31, 2017, https://projects.arlingtonva.us/planning/smart-growth/

key debate participants. The paper then moves to the rhetoric of streetcar supporters, examining in particular how supporters responded to concerns about gentrification while defending the broader vision of sustainable, transit-oriented development symbolized by the streetcar project. A concluding section will discuss what the spectacular failure of the Arlington Streetcar suggests about the cultural politics of smart growth development in the present conjuncture, drawing on Andrew Ross's recent call to redefine sustainable development in ways which directly confront class inequality and prioritize social justice.

Columbia Pike and the Arlington Streetcar

To understand the birth and death of the Arlington Streetcar, you have to know something about the Columbia Pike corridor – that is, the section of South Arlington the project would have served. After the Pentagon was built at Columbia Pike's eastern end in the late 1940s, the corridor saw a brief flurry of housing and commercial development, followed quickly by multiple decades of economic decline as the attention of developers and County officials turned elsewhere.[11] It was during this period of official neglect, however, that the corridor also became home to thousands of new immigrants. Indeed, by the turn of the century, the Columbia Pike corridor could boast, as one Brookings Institute report put it, "the world in a zip code," home to a rich diversity of native- and foreign-born residents from over 128 countries, who were distributed widely across the income and occupation spectrum as well.[12] At the beginning of the streetcar planning process, then, Columbia Pike was a study in contradiction: a series of diverse, vibrant, 21st century American communities arrayed along a car-oriented suburban thoroughfare seemingly stuck in the 1960s.

In 1998, county officials returned to the corridor with the Columbia Pike Initiative (CPI), a civic planning group which, by 2002, had established a vision for future development on the Pike steeped in smart growth principles.[13] The CPI's

---

[11] *Columbia Pike Initiative: A Revitalization Plan, Volumes I and II* (Arlington, VA: Department of Community Planning, Housing, and Development, 2002), accessed May 31, 2017, https://projects.arlingtonva.us/neighborhoods/columbia-pike-planning/

[12] Audrey Singer, Samantha Friedman, Ivan Cheung, and Marie Price, *The World in a Zip Code: Greater Washington, D.C. as a New Region of Immigration*. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2001), accessed May 31, 2017, http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2001/04/washington-dc-singer

[13] The Columbia Pike Initiative held planning meetings and charrettes between 1998 and 2012, producing a series of planning documents that were ratified by the County Board and which continue to inform development and urban design along the Pike. See "Columbia Pike Planning Timeline," *Arlington County Government* (website), accessed

plan encouraged a mix of commercial and residential development at increased levels of density to accommodate anticipated population growth. The aging streetscape of parking lots, gas stations, and strip malls would be replaced by new mid-scale (six to ten story), mixed-use office and residential buildings. To make the corridor "walkable," these buildings would front the street, with retail at ground level and underground parking accessed at the back. Sidewalks would be lined with trees and enlarged to provide space for pedestrians and café seating. And, finally, in order to link it all together, the County would build a new, modern transportation centerpiece: the Arlington Streetcar.[14]

But let's step back for a minute and ask an important question. Why streetcars? Why not other options, like subways or buses? As it happens, the streetcar emerged from a process of elimination. Simply doing nothing was not an option. Although auto traffic still flowed reasonably well, existing bus service on the Pike—the most-used bus route in Virginia—was already at full capacity.[15] With population along the Pike projected to increase by 21 percent between 2010 and 2030, things would only get more clogged.[16] Tunneling under the Pike to extend Metrorail (Washington's subway system) would cost *billions* of dollars, so no one took that option seriously. Building a light rail line or a gold-standard bus rapid transit system (BRT) would require a dedicated lane—something that was impossible on the Pike.[17] This left, essentially, two options: articulated buses and streetcars.

May 31, 2017, http://projects.arlingtonva.us/neighborhoods/columbia-pike-development-history/timeline/

[14] *Columbia Pike Initiative: A Revitalization Plan*; *Columbia Pike Neighborhoods Area Plan* (Arlington, VA: Columbia Pike Land Use & Housing Study Group, 2012), accessed May 31, 2017, https://projects.arlingtonva.us/neighborhoods/columbia-pike-planning/

[15] *Columbia Pike Transit Initiative: Alternative Analysis/Environmental Analysis, vol. 1* (Arlington, VA: Pike Transit Initiative, May 2012), 1-4, accessed May 31, 2017, https://projects.arlingtonva.us/plans-studies/transportation/columbia-pike-transit-initiative/

[16] Ibid.

[17] *Locally Preferred Alternative Report* (Arlington, VA: Columbia Pike Transit Initiative, July 2012), accessed May 31, 2017, http://projects.arlingtonva.us/plans-studies/transportation/columbia-pike-transit-initiative/

Figure 1 - The Arlington Streetcar (artist's rendering)

Source: StreetcarNOW (http://streetcarnow.org/template/pike-streetcar-small.jpg)

Although enhancing bus service with articulated buses was a less expensive option, County planners pointed to what they saw as the streetcar's many tangible and intangible advantages. First, on the tangible side, each streetcar would hold more people (155 compared to 94) than an articulated bus, allowing the streetcar option to keep up with the anticipated growth in ridership (while one consultant's study suggested that articulated buses would be over capacity during peak times).[18] Yet there were other, more intangible benefits as well. Streetcars offer a smoother ride. They never change their routes or timing, so they are more predictable and legible to potential riders. For these reasons, supporters argue that streetcars are more popular with users than more proletarian buses—particularly among users (called "choice riders") who might otherwise drive to work.[19] Finally, a streetcar line, as permanent infrastructure, also would signal to potential developers the County's long-term commitment to the Pike. As a result, when compared to enhanced bus service, the streetcar promised to spark more commercial and

---

[18] *Columbia Pike Transit Initiative: Comparative Return on Investment Study* (Washington, DC: HR&A Advisors, March 2014), accessed May 31, 2017, http://projects.arlingtonva.us/plans-studies/transportation/columbia-pike-transit-initiative/

[19] "Why Streetcars?" StreetcarNOW (website), accessed May 31, 2017, http://streetcarnow.org/information/why-streetcars.aspx. Moshe Ben-Akiva and Takayuki Morikawa, "Comparing Ridership Attraction of Rail and Bus," *Transport Policy* 9, no. 2 (2002): 107-116.

residential development along the corridor, thus helping fulfill the higher-density, walkable, smart-growth vision of the Neighborhoods Plan.[20]

To be sure, these predicted benefits came with a hefty price: $333 million. But County leaders were confident this was still a good deal for taxpayers. Overall, state and regional transportation funds would cover $263.3 million of the total cost. This left Arlington County's share at $69.7 million, to be paid by an *existing* tax on commercial and industrial properties—a tax which, by state law, could only be used on transportation projects. So although the price tag was high, County staff noted that Arlington would only have to come up with just over 20 percent of the total funding, and would do so without raising additional taxes on businesses or residents.[21] Given that Arlington voters had always supported meaningful investments in transportation in the past, this deal seemed eminently do-able. Seeing the numbers, and the advantages of rail over bus, the public would no doubt get on board once again.

Enter the Opposition and the Politics of Articulation

For a nearly a decade, from 2002 to 2011, these rosy predictions of the project's ultimate approval seemed justified as the project easily cleared multiple political and administrative hurdles during the planning process. But this all changed beginning in 2012. The first sign of significant opposition arrived with the election of former school board member Libby Garvey to the County Board in a March special election. Elected without taking a firm position on the streetcar, her skepticism about the project's costs soon became clear when she abstained from a streetcar vote in July and then announced her full-blown opposition in October.[22]

---

[20] *Columbia Pike Transit Initiative: Comparative Return on Investment Study* (Washington, DC: HR&A Advisors, March 2014), accessed May 31, 2017, http://projects.arlingtonva.us/plans-studies/transportation/columbia-pike-transit-initiative/

[21] Patricia Sullivan, "More State Money to Fund Contentious Arlington Streetcar," *Washington Post*, July 20, 2014. Budget figures from Arlington County Manager's Office, "Subject: CIP – Columbia Pike Streetcar Alternative Funding Plan" (internal memo), accessed online May 31, 2017, http://arlingtonva.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2014/07/E-8-Combined.pdf. See also, Ethan Rothstein, County Board to Vote on Alternative Streetcar Funding Plan," *ARLNow* (blog), July 17, 2014, https://www.arlnow.com/2014/07/17/county-board-to-vote-on-alternative-streetcar-funding-plan-saturday/

[22] Patricia Sullivan, "Arlington County Board Endorses Columbia Pike Streetcar Project," *Washington Post*, July 24, 2012; Patricia Sullivan, "Arlington Board Election Focuses on Streetcar Debate," *Washington Post*, October, 21, 2012.

Outside the board, opponents were organizing as well. Leading the charge was Peter Rousellot, a former chair of the Arlington Democratic Committee. Rousselot had authored a report highly critical of the streetcar project in October 2012, sending it to the Board in the hope that it might change a few minds. When this report was met with silence from every Board member apart from Garvey, Rousellot organized a meeting with other streetcar opponents in December 2012. At this meeting, they decided to keep fighting and formed Arlingtonians for Sensible Transit (AST), a non-profit advocacy group dedicated to killing the streetcar. Working together, Rousselot's AST and Libby Garvey became the public faces of the growing opposition movement, with Garvey voicing her objections from the Board, and Rousselot and AST organizing like-minded opponents throughout the County.[23]

Overall, Garvey and AST argued that the high cost of building a streetcar line was prohibitive, especially given that the streetcar would be forced to share a lane with cars and buses, thus limiting its reliability and speed. Instead, they argued for enhancing bus service on the Pike by building what Rousselot and company called a "Bus Rapid Transit" line featuring larger-capacity buses. Although these articulated buses would also share a traffic lane with cars (which, for Rousselot's critics, raised the question of whether his proposal indeed qualified for "BRT" status), this enhanced bus service would move comparable numbers of riders at a fraction of the cost.[24]

By January 2013, then, the streetcar proposal, once a smooth-running machine, had jumped its tracks. Beginning its life as an unremarkable extension of Arlington's smart growth planning legacy, the streetcar was now at the center of public controversy and debate. And looking back on this debate, it becomes clear

---

[23] Interviews, Arlingtonians for Sensible Transit.

[24] Peter Rousselot, "A Bus Rapid Transit System is Far Superior to Streetcars in the Columbia Pike Corridor, October 6, 2012," accessed online, May 31, 2017, https://archive.org/stream/471180-arlington-streetcar-study/#page/n0/mode/2up. The precise meaning of the term "Bus Rapid Transit" or "BRT" was the subject of much controversy during the debate. For Rousselot and AST, a bus line could still qualify as "BRT" even if it shared a lane with auto traffic, so long as it included other features common in BRT systems that would speed buses along (including off-bus fare collection and traffic signal prioritization). AST's perspective is supported by the National Bus Rapid Transit Institute (NBRT). However, supporters of the streetcar argued that true BRT systems—order to qualify as "rapid"—required a dedicated lane. This critique corresponds with the definition of BRT advanced by The Institute for Transportation and Development Policy. For details on how the NBRT defines "BRT," see A. Cain, J. Flynn, M. McCourt, and T. Reyes, *Quantifying the importance of image and perception to Bus Rapid Transit* (Tampa, FL: National Bus Rapid Transit Institute, Center for Urban Transportation Research, 2009).

that the political and rhetorical strategy pursued by Garvey and AST offers a textbook example of what Stuart Hall calls the politics of *articulation.*

What Hall suggests, drawing on the political theories of Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, is that the meanings of political symbols like "the Arlington Streetcar" or "smart growth planning" are not inherent or natural but instead emerge from the associations political actors forge between signifiers in a semiotic network or chain.[25] To explain how these associations are forged, Hall, building on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe,[26] draws on the concept of articulation, noting in particular that the term itself carries a "double meaning": to articulate is both to *speak* and to *link*.[27] Applied to the realm of political rhetoric, the concept suggests that the meaning of an individual signifier – such as "the streetcar" – depends ultimately on its network of linkages, that is, its network of articulations, to other signifiers circulating in the cultural field. There is thus a rich political struggle over the manner and type of these linkages, with, for instance, some groups attempting to link "streetcar" with "smart growth" and "sustainability" while others attempt to link "streetcar" with "boondoggle" and "yuppie." In this way, Hall argues that the social meaning of key symbols emerges from a struggle to imprint one's own system of articulations as the common sense of the larger social field.

For her part, Janice Radway views the process of articulation as analogous to stitching together a quilt out of multiple ideological fabrics.[28] Drawing on this quilting metaphor, she argues that successful political and ideological struggle depends on carefully weaving together disparate, and even potentially contradictory, ideas and symbols together, in order to build alliances and coalitions among multiple political actors. To be sure, the results can be tension-filled and uneven. Where two interests meet, the ideological seam can stretch and strain. But if these seams can hold together, at least for a time, the political project can be achieved before the actors and interests tear apart, to be stitched together again, usually in a new pattern or configuration.

Drawing on the theory of articulation and Radway's metaphor of ideological seams, the following sections will explore how streetcar opponents—

[25]Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 5–27; Lawrence Grossberg "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 45–60.

[26] Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: Verso, 1977); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

[27] Lawrence Grossberg "On Postmodernism and Articulation," 53.

[28] Janice Radway, "Identifying Ideological Seams: Mass Culture, Analytical Method, and Political Practice," *Communication* 9 (1986): 93-124.

in particular Arlingtonians for Sensible Transit—stitched together a number of disparate discourses and political actors in their fight against the streetcar. In order to examine the discourses that AST leaders were able to weave together, this paper examines the blog comment fields in Arlington County's leading local news blog, ARLNow.com. Like many other hyperlocal news sites, ARLNow.com fills an important gap in the local news ecosystem, particularly as community newspapers close their doors and legacy city papers retreat from regional coverage.[29] Moreover, blogs like ARLNow.com also allow users to comment on news stories and features, an interactive invitation that users in Arlington have accepted with both enthusiasm and varying degrees of civility.[30] To be sure, blog comments should not be viewed as representative samples of local public opinion. However, at the same time, advocates and partisans on all sides of the issue used these comment fields as a rhetorical arena of struggle, responding not merely to the online article in question but especially to one another in strings that routinely exceeded 100 total comments. As such, these comment fields provided an imperfect but still enlightening view into the range of political arguments and discourses that were circulating around the Arlington Streetcar during the height of the debate.

In total, this article examines blog comments posted on 13 ARLNow.com articles. These 13 articles were randomly selected from a wider population of 41 news articles on the Arlington Streetcar published between October 16, 2012 (just prior to Garvey's announcement of her opposition) and November 19, 2014 (the day after the project was cancelled). This archive of blog comments was then supplemented by thirteen in-person interviews with debate participants to contextualize this data within a broader historical and political understanding of the debate itself.

To conduct this qualitative analysis, I imported the entire blog comment fields from each of the 13 articles into NVivo (qualitative analysis software). Blog comments were then analyzed drawing on an open coding process adapted from Kathy Charmaz's constructivist model for building grounded theory.[31] In my initial wave of coding, I labelled segments of data with descriptive codes, then, using constant comparison, I grouped individual statements on the streetcar into higher-

---

[29] Monica Chadha, "The Neighborhood Hyperlocal." *Digital Journalism 4*, no. 6 (2016): 743–63.

[30] Although there were certainly many moments of incivility in these blog comment fields, there were also more constructive arguments as well, with writers providing links to official reports and data to support their views. This more positive appraisal of blog comment fields corresponds with the findings of Graham Todd and Scott Wright. "A Tale of Two Stories from 'Below the Line': Comment Fields at the Guardian." *The International Journal of Press/Politics 20,* no. 3 (2015): 317–38.

[31] Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014).

order categories. These categories were then explored in successive waves of coding for their inter-connections and relationships, with the aim of interpreting the broader ideological systems informing support of and opposition to not merely the streetcar proposal, but also the larger project of smart growth urbanism and transit-oriented development.

Overall, this analysis produced a coherent picture of AST's project of political articulation. In particular, I will focus on how AST wove together, in a skillful way, two unlikely ideological threads to produce a potent anti-streetcar coalition: (1) a small government/libertarian defense of suburban automobility and (2) concerns of gentrification and displacement, especially among some residents of the Columbia Pike corridor. As we will discover, these discourses exist in a fair amount of tension with one another. Small-government libertarians are not often allied with class-conscious critics of urban gentrification. Yet AST was able to serve as a conduit for both of these critiques, and, as we will see, the seam stitching them together was able to hold together long enough to kill the streetcar. Following a discussion of these two intertwined discursive threads, and a brief review of how supporters attempted to respond to these threads, the article concludes with a discussion of the political implications of the case, especially for advocates of smart growth and transit alternatives.

Discursive Thread 1: Small Government and Suburban Automobility

One of the most prominent discourses of opposition focused on government spending, and especially on a County Board that many opponents viewed as out of touch and eager to overspend on "pet projects." As one opponent put it, the County board "refuses to listen to residents, vote [sic] for their vanity, pet projects and think nothing of simply increasing real estate assessments to cover their habit of spending like drunken sailors." Other terms like "toy" and "trophy" came up numerous times as well, typically followed by a short list of examples of presumably wasteful spending. At the top of this list were usually two items: a $79 million dollar proposed aquatic center and a $1 million dollar "Super [bus] Stop," located on the corner of Columbia Pike and Walter Reed Drive and built in anticipation of the streetcar line (see Figure 2).[32] Overall, these opponents argued that "the board needs to stop living in their Monopoly money fantasy land. Our taxes are extremely high and need to go towards more important and practical uses."

---

[32] Patricia Sullivan, "Arlington's Long Bridge Park Aquatics Center is in Limbo because of Ballooning Costs," *Washington Post*, January 11, 2014; "$1M Bus Stop Raises Ire of Va. Residents," *CBS News* (online), accessed May 31, 2017, http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/1m-bus-stop-raises-ire-of-va-residents/

Figure 2 - The Infamous "Super Stop"

Source: Author photograph

In this regard, the streetcar was framed as just another example of wasteful spending in Arlington. For opponents, the streetcar was a "useless toy" and a "tourist trolley" (more on the "trolley" symbol later). It was, as one opponent summed it up, "a small but astronomically expensive vanity project." Notably, when focusing on costs, opponents typically cited the *total* cost ($333 million) instead of Arlington's share of this total ($70 million). This total cost was then often contrasted with the much less expensive option of expanding and enhancing the existing bus service with articulated buses. As one opponent wrote, "so what's the magical difference between a streetcar and a bus line that stops at the exact same stops for a 1/10 of the cost?"

In fact, some writers took a further step by simply defending the existing bus service and arguing for adding a few more vehicles to the fleet. As one opponent wrote, "I don't see why having a Street Car is any better than adding a bus or two. Aren't there a lot of busses going up and down Columbia Pike already?" Buses on the Pike are "speedy and frequent and [do] the job well" wrote another. With a popular bus service already in place, opponents argued that adding the streetcar would add an expensive and inflexible vehicle (tied down to rails) onto an already-clogged road. The lack of dedicated lane came up repeatedly in these bus-to-streetcar comparisons. What happens when cars break down? Stuck on rails, streetcars would rapidly pile up behind any obstruction in its way—as illustrated by a photo from Toronto's streetcar system which AST distributed widely during the debate (see Figure 3). Given these risks, why not simply add more buses, which

are flexible enough to move around obstacles and have a proven track record on the Pike? As one opponent said, "I don't get the bus hate."

Figure 3 - Photo Featured in AST Advertising (Toronto Streetcar system)

Source: ARLNow.com

Interestingly, some opponents linked this complaint that the streetcar was just another County Board "vanity" project to a broader libertarian critique of government power and overreach. In these comments, the taxes used to build the streetcar were framed as *takings* (as in "taking our money," as one opponent put it), and government officials were described as playing with "other people's money." These writers sometimes linked the critique of local government to their objections to federal politicians (particularly former President Obama) and national issues. So for example, when Arlington County failed to win a federal grant to support the streetcar, one opponent wrote dryly, "that must have been 'some plan'—it couldn't even get one seventh the amount that the Feds gave to Solyndra. Even the Bridge to Nowhere was originally funded!" In a similar vein, when the streetcar was cancelled in November 2014, another opponent celebrated by writing, "yay! Let's return the money to the people, and stop using the force of government to steal from one group and give to another."

For many opponents, especially those skeptical of government spending, the streetcar was therefore a frivolous extra. Instead, opponents wanted the County to focus on basic services, or, as one opponent put it, "needs not wants." And at the top of this list was schools. Overall, Arlington has one of the best-funded and high-achieving public school systems in Virginia. At the same time, the system is currently struggling to keep up with growing enrollment, and overcrowding has led

to the use of temporary classrooms at many elementary schools.[33] So as the streetcar debate began to heat up in 2013, streetcar supporters were alarmed to see that leaders of some local PTAs had begun to speak out against the project. For their part, supporters suspected that AST and especially Libby Garvey (a former school board member) were behind the sudden activism of agitated parents and accused them of promoting the erroneous idea that streetcar funding would come at the expense of the school system.[34] Whether an intentional strategy or not, schools were clearly on the minds of many streetcar opponents. As one writer put it, "we have more pressing needs in the county, particularly having room to educate our children. We need that money to give them an environment in which to learn, not being crammed into classrooms, especially trailers."

That opponents would want the County to focus on building schools and, for a smaller number of writers, fixing roads is perhaps not surprising, given another prominent pattern in the blog comments: the spirited defense of auto-centric, low-density suburban living. One thread in this pattern focused on the presumed superiority of the automobile compared to mass transit. This thread especially emerged whenever supporters argued that the streetcar would attract more transit riders than buses, given the streetcar's more comfortable ride and more modern look and feel. In response, some opponents would dismiss the idea that anyone who could afford to own a car would actually take mass transit of any kind. As one writer exclaimed, "PEOPLE LIKE THEIR CARS!" Others were more comical, including one opponent who assumed the username "GetACar" and posted an auto loan ad depicting a white, middle-class family at a bus stop, with the tag line: "Need a ride? Auto loan rates as low as 2.99%" (see Figure 4).

Implied in these comments is the idea that mass transit is only for people who cannot afford cars. As one opponent wrote, "so… people are going to see the street car and think 'wow that's cool, I'm going to park my car and ride…?' You're dreaming." For this reason, given that most new residents coming to the Pike will be able to afford their own cars, opponents predicted that tomorrow's modern streetcar would only be filled with today's proletarian bus riders—in short, those who have no other choice but to ride. Anyone else who *can* drive, *will* drive. As one writer put it, "some of these jokers claim that people are going to see the street

---

[33] Moriah Balingit, "Arlington School Officials Grapple with Overcrowding Plan for New Middle Schools," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2014.

[34] In interviews, supporters pointed out, with great frustration, that Arlington's funding for the Streetcar came from a tax that could only be spent on transportation projects. Therefore by law this revenue could not be used to construct new schools. They accused AST and Garvey of knowing this fact, but willfully exploiting parents' fears anyway.

cars and think it's the coolest thing ever and not drive their cars and hop on. Not going to happen. [But] people that used to ride metro buses, yes."

Figure 4 - Blog comment image posted by "GetACar" (username)

Source: ARLNow.com (blog comments)

This rejection of transit in general and streetcars in particular could also be found in the word choices of many opponents. In their blog comments, opponents repeatedly used the word "trolley" as opposed to "streetcar," the preferred term of supporters. In particular, "trolley" was often used in conjunction with "folly" or "little" (as is "folly trolley" or "little trolley"). Overall, these symbols worked to diminish the streetcar and to evoke frivolous images of children and toys (e.g., the trolley on *Mister Roger's Neighborhood*). Further, there is an "old-timey" connotation to the term "trolley," a connotation that links streetcars to an archaic, 19th century form of transportation. Indeed, this equation of "trolley" with "archaic" was made explicit in the strategy of posting old photos of nineteenth or early twentieth century streetcars in the comment fields (see Figure 5). Overall, these rhetorical choices not only framed the streetcar as a frivolous toy (e.g., "tourist trolley") but also sought to undercut supporters' attempts to portray the streetcar as a "modern" and "efficient" transit alternative, and one being adopted by forward-thinking cities in the USA and Europe.

Figure 5 - Streetcar as Trolley (Photo from Comment Field)

"MOVE UP, PLEASE, THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM AHEAD'

A Le Droit Park Car With Its Cargo of Bureau of Engraving Employes at the Corner of Fourteenth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue.

Source: ARLNow.com (blog comments)

If some opponents pushed back against the "transit" part of "transit-oriented development," others took aim on the connection between the streetcar and the County's wider plan to increase density on the Pike. In these comments, urban density was associated with a long list of urban ills, including traffic, congestion, overpriced housing, and crowded schools. As one opponent wrote, "oh wait, density means more property taxes so the board can give themselves another raise and then come up with more lunatic projects. It also means more trash, more noise and a more stressful environment." Likewise, streetcar supporters were accused of wanting to transform Arlington into "K Street," "Hong Kong," or "New York," with Columbia Pike becoming a "condo canyon" or "concrete jungle." Multiple writers rejected this growth, arguing explicitly that they "didn't move to Arlington" to live in a dense urban area:

> I don't want to see quality of life in Arlington County go downhill through all of these new buildings being crammed into what little space we have. Many of us came here because of the suburban feel that many of Arlington's neighborhoods offer, including neighborhoods off Columbia Pike. Stop turning Arlington into an extension of Washington, DC. If I wanted to live on K Street with all of its high rises and service roads, I would have.

Overall, opponents sought to frame the Arlington Streetcar as the latest of a series of "vanity" boondoggles, generated from an irresponsible County Board too focused on "spending other people's money." This line of argument—that a new mass transit line is not a necessity in a growing urban corridor but rather a wasteful, big government "trophy"—further required opponents to directly confront and critique the premises of transit-oriented or smart growth development. As we've seen, they did so by offering a vigorous defense of suburban living. Supporters may *think* the streetcar will attract more riders, they argued, but really people love their cars. And supporters may love the idea of using the streetcar to develop the Pike into a higher-density, more urbanized "main street" but for *us* density means trash, noise, traffic, and crowds. We didn't move to Arlington for that.

In short, our first discursive thread—a small-government defense of suburban automobility—is defensive and small-c conservative. It is oriented to preserving the "suburban feel" of Arlington and takes a dim view of attempts to urbanize the County. This drive to preserve, to maintain, informs the view of County government as well. The Board needs to pull on the reins, slow down, and focus on the basics. Good schools, good roads, and low taxes – these are the priorities of a care-taking government, oriented to preserving the value of what has already been achieved. Within this discourse, then, the move to build up density on the Pike, with an expensive mass transit line no less, seems ridiculous. Not only does urban density bring urban problems, but the "trolley" itself is a ridiculous throwback to a pre-automobile age. It represents a loss of privacy and autonomy, and as such will be shunned by those who can afford to drive. As a "toy" that will only carry today's bus riders at an inflated cost, the trolley must be stopped.

Discursive Thread 2: The Critique of Gentrification and Displacement

When talking with Arlington residents, it does not usually take very long before you hear a distinction drawn between "North" and "South" Arlington. Over the past 50 years, this division (marked neatly by the East-West path of Route 50) has taken on class and racial connotations, with North Arlington typically referred to as wealthy and (mostly) white, and South Arlington as home to the County's working-class, middle-class, and families of color (including both historically Black neighborhoods and new immigrants). To be sure, this spatial division has blurred recently. As one participant noted, the development of the Orange Line corridor (along Wilson Boulevard) into a walkable, urban district of high-rise condos and upscale retail has made this part of North Arlington much different culturally and economically than the more suburban, far-northern reaches of the County. And for its part, continually rising housing prices in South Arlington have slowly transformed these neighborhoods as well, as older, poorer residents are slowly replaced by younger and wealthier families. Still, overall the North/South

distinction remains relevant to many Arlingtonians, particularly as a quick shorthand when discussing the politics of class and race in the County.

Of particular relevance to the discussion of class and race in South Arlington, and especially on Columbia Pike, is Arlington's ongoing affordable housing crisis. In 2000, for example, 26 percent of all rental units in Arlington were classified as "affordable" for residents earning 60 percent of the Area Median Income (AMI). Just 14 years later, only *9 percent* of all Arlington rental units were affordable to residents earning 60 percent AMI. Overall, the County lost 13,500 affordable rental units in 14 years, due mostly to rent increases.[35] The steady loss of affordable housing in Arlington has led in turn to a steady exodus of low- and middle-income households. Between 2000 and 2012, in fact, the number of households earning less than $60,000 a year dropped by nearly 10 percent. (In comparison, the number of Arlington households earning more than $200,000 *increased* by nearly 60 percent during this same period).[36] Between 2000 and 2014, in short, Arlington as a whole was getting richer and whiter as market-rate affordable housing units disappeared.[37]

By the time the streetcar debate heated up in 2013-2014, then, the Columbia Pike corridor had become the last zone of affordability in the County. If, in 2000, the Pike was home to just over one-third of all the market-rate affordable housing in Arlington, by 2014, this percentage had risen to *one-half*.[38] In short, with the disappearance of affordable units elsewhere in the County, by 2014 fully one-half of all the affordable market-rate units in Arlington were located on the Pike, concentrated particularly in two large garden apartment developments (Barcroft and Fillmore Gardens). Overall, low- and middle-income residents on the Pike could be forgiven if they felt besieged by increasing rents and the advancing frontier of gentrification and displacement that had overwhelmed virtually every other neighborhood in Arlington.

---

[35] *Affordable Housing Master Plan* (Arlington, VA: Arlington County Government, September 2015), accessed online May 31, 2017, http://housing.arlingtonva.us/affordable-housing-master-plan/, 37. Keep in mind that, in Northern Virginia, a household earning 60 percent of the Area Median Income is not poor by any stretch. In 2017, a four-person household earning 60 percent of AMI was still pulling in an annual income of $66,180. Yet Arlington housing is so expensive that even these households—solidly middle-class by national standards—were getting pushed out. For details, see "Housing: Income and Rent Limits," *Arlingtonva.us* (county government website), accessed May 31, 2017, https://housing.arlingtonva.us/income-rent-limits/

[36] Ibid, 11.

[37] Ibid, 10.

[38] *Affordable Housing Master Plan*, 40.

Given this context, it probably comes as little surprise that some residents of the Pike viewed the coming of the streetcar, and the larger plan to transform the Pike into a walkable, more urbanized neighborhood, with some trepidation. In fact, in the comment fields, almost all of the writers who expressed the most concern about the problem of gentrification in Arlington—including increasing rents, a loss of racial and ethnic diversity, and displacement of low-income people—were opposed to the streetcar.

On the whole, the writers who expressed concerns about gentrification saw an Arlington that was getting more and more unaffordable and increasingly home only to either the über-wealthy or the lucky few who happened to land one of the County's few subsidized affordable units. As one streetcar opponent wrote:

> The middle class is getting completely swept out of Arlington. A family can afford to live here only if they have a ~175K+ income, or in affordable housing at ~50K per year. But GOOD LUCK trying to stay afloat here on any income in between. The county board doesn't give a sh-- about helping those people out.

In short, for these writers, the larger trend of pushing out the working- and middle-class had finally reached Columbia Pike, home of the last diverse neighborhoods in Arlington, with a healthy contingent of (as one writer put it) "actual, working-class people." This class and ethnic diversity was now under serious assault:

> You are already seeing this shift in the Arlington Public schools. HB-Woodlawn, Yorktown and Washington Lee have always been significantly white about 60%+ while Wakefield [the high school serving Columbia Pike and South Arlington] has always been 60% non white [sic]. Now thats changing and wakefield is following and becoming more white [sic].

For these writers, the streetcar was therefore viewed as a catalyst for accelerating gentrification and displacement along the Pike. One writer summed it up this way: "More streetcars --> More yuppies --> More tax revenue --> More streetcars...It's a vicious cycle," while another quipped, "will the streetcar have a froyo shop inside each car? This streetcar thing is going to be a hot mess. Its [sic] like they want more yuppies to move to Arlington." Interestingly, when asked why they made the connection between "streetcars" and "gentrification," two interviewees said that it was the language used by supporters when discussing the streetcar that sparked their concerns. For instance, when supporters would argue that the new residents coming to the Pike will be more likely to ride streetcars than buses, they took this as "code" for *gentrifiers*. In short, it seemed to them that the County—and the developers of the Pike's newest properties—wanted to attract a

more affluent clientele to the Pike, a clientele that wouldn't be caught dead on a bus (the service in place for existing residents), but would deign to use a streetcar.

To underline the connection between the streetcar and gentrification, some opponents drew on the historical example of the Orange Line corridor, or what county planners call the "Rosslyn-Ballston (R-B) corridor." In interviews, multiple participants (including both supporters and opponents) noted that, prior to the arrival of the underground Metrorail line, these neighborhoods (including Rosslyn, Clarendon, and Ballston) were decidedly suburban, middle- and working-class, and home to significant immigrant communities. With the arrival of Metrorail, however, land values increased dramatically in these neighborhoods, leading to the construction of a dense corridor of high-rise, mixed-use developments, with high-end apartments, condos, office space, and retail. Today, the R-B corridor stands as both an award-winning example of transit-oriented development *and* as a tangible symbol of the link between smart growth and accelerating housing costs.

Would the streetcar spark a similar wave of investment, redevelopment, and gentrification, this time in the last affordable corridor in the County? For many opponents the parallels were unsettling. As one writer argued, if building the streetcar succeeded in raising property values on the Pike, only "higher-end" businesses would be able to stay, thus depriving residents of more affordable places to shop and eat. Overall, this writer concluded, "new sources of tax revenue are great for the county in total, but making Columbia Pike into the next Orange Line corridor would force a lot of people out of the area. Do we really want ALL of Arlington to be Yuppieville/Bro-ville?" Other commenters felt the same way. For example, writing after the project's cancellation and in response to a supporter who argued the streetcar would have "revitalized" the Pike, one opponent asked, "why do you think Columbia Pike is such a dump? I love Columbia Pike—nice ethnic restaurants, none of the d-bags found in places like Clarendon and Ballston, (relatively) affordable places to live, and a truly diverse population. The streetcar would have ruined all the things that make Columbia Pike great."

A final theme related to the streetcar and gentrification concerned the role of developers, who were viewed by these opponents as the primary beneficiaries of the proposed streetcar. As one opponent wrote,

> The most ardent supporters are property developers and a handful of homeowners along the pike [sic] who bought speculatively, hoping to get rich quick by getting their neighbors to foot the bill for a streetcar they hope will juice property values…why should I and most of the county vote to hand over our taxes to make a few property developers and homeowners wealthier than they already are? So that I can ride a trolley to an expensive restaurant? Everyone is just in this for the money.

Again, other writers felt the same way. For instance, in response to a supporter who noted that the streetcar would bring in billions of dollars in increased tax revenues (due to enhancing development on the Pike), one opponent asked, "where are those 'billions' in revenue supposed to come from? All that money in revenue to the government equals billions in costs to regular people. All that 'revenue' is simply moving money around, taking from low and middle income people and giving it to the ultra-wealthy bureaucrats and politicians."

Interestingly, it is at this point—when concerns about displacement connect with claims about the cozy relationship between real estate developers and public officials—where the critique of gentrification begins to bleed into a libertarian discourse critical of public spending and government corruption. In short, the critique of a corrupt government, beholden to developers, is only one short leap away from a more fundamental dismissal of the idea that an activist government should be mobilized to address collective problems. Government in this libertarian-inflected discourse is a "corruption magnet," attracting all manner of actors looking to extract "rents" from government in the form of tax breaks and special interest spending. To be sure, not all individuals who opposed the streetcar for reasons related to gentrification were prepared to take this leap. But the two quotes above indeed resonate with how small-government libertarians discuss public investments: as "taking" "our taxes" and giving them to illegitimate actors (in this case, "developers" or "the ultra-wealthy") for selfish ends.

These resonances offered the discursive material that opposition leaders used to stitch together the disparate elements of their anti-streetcar coalition. It is likely that many of the small-government defenders of suburban automobility had little concern for preserving affordable housing on the Pike. Their opposition to the streetcar had more to do with a more traditionally conservative goal of keeping taxes low and government focused on the basics of suburban living (schools and roads). Likewise, it seems likely that many of those concerned about gentrification on the Pike were not ideologically opposed to urban living per se, nor were they critics of activist government more generally. They were simply worried that the streetcar would spark a wave of upscale development and increased rents. Yet despite their differences, these two groups shared a common sense about the need for *preservation* – that is, the desire to preserve Columbia Pike "as is." For some this meant keeping the Pike (as well as the rest of Arlington) "suburban." For others it meant keeping it "affordable." But, regardless of their divergent visions, these differences could nonetheless be articulated under a broader goal to *preserve* the existing corridor, to force the County to take its foot off the development accelerator. And that meant killing the streetcar.

The Supporters: Development, Affordable Housing, and the Metro Legacy

Overall, in the comment fields, streetcar supporters did not really engage with the problem of gentrification or displacement, at least not directly. Their preferred term was a more technical one: "development." For supporters, the streetcar would bring "more development" to the Pike. Further, these comments drew on an "organic city" metaphor, equating development with "growth" and growth with urban vitality and life.[39] For example:

> The Pike is choked with traffic…If we don't do something about it, economic development there could get choked off.

> A bus-only system will do nothing to generate buzz about the Pike. No one who currently does not go or live there will go or live there with a bus-only system. Business will not grow. The growth you see now is in anticipation of the trolley. If you want the Pike to remain what it is today (check out property values and crime statistics), then the only option is a bus-only system.

Interestingly, although some supporters did offer a more detailed defense of the Columbia Pike Neighborhood Plan and the larger model of walkable, higher-density, transit-oriented development, for the most part the specific *form* of development was not specified beyond the idea of "more," as in "more investment" or "more development." Instead, these supporters fetishized development as having intrinsic value, placing particular emphasis on how growth would benefit the County as a whole by generating more tax revenue for services and schools. As one supporter wrote,

> [The] Streetcar…will move a lot more people, will generate a lot more economic development/jobs/growth, will be much more heavily used, will revitalize the entire Pike corridor, [and] will integrate better into the broader regional transportation and development plans

Or as another put it, "Better infrastructure=better development. Better county services, better quality of life [sic]."

Overall, supporters did not often engage with or respond to opponents' concerns about the streetcar's role in accelerating gentrification. This said, many supporters (both in the comment fields and in interviews) did advance arguments that suggested the streetcar—as part of the wider Columbia Pike Neighborhoods Plan—would in fact play a crucial role in *preserving* affordable housing on the

---

[39] Timothy Gibson, "The Trope of the Organic City," *Space and Culture 6*, no. 4 (2003): 429-448.

Pike. This argument is complex. It begins with the premise that, given its proximity to DC, the Columbia Pike corridor will almost certainly be redeveloped in the next 10-15 years, with the aging but affordable garden apartments a prime candidate for condo reconversion. Property owners have a right to do this, and eventually they will do so. However, the Columbia Pike Neighborhoods Plan allows developers to build at higher densities (above the underlying zoning), so long as they agree to follow the plan's guidelines, including a provision to set aside a particular number of units in the development as "committed affordable housing" (or, failing that, to pay into an affordable housing trust fund).

However, and here is this key point, developers will only agree to follow the plan if they feel excited by the future of the Pike. If they are bullish on the Pike, they will want to build at higher densities (above zoning), which means they will want to follow the terms of the Plan, set aside those affordable units, and therefore win a density bonus from the County. But if they are only lukewarm on the Pike, they will simply redevelop the property "by right." This means they can simply follow the underlying zoning, build at a lower density, and avoid any commitment to building affordable units. So the County's only leverage is the developers' own enthusiasm. If developers are enthused, they will spring for higher density above the underlying zoning. This in turn brings them to the table with the County, resulting in more committed affordable housing.

The streetcar, in short, was a way to get developers excited about the Pike. Not only did it represent the County's permanent commitment to the corridor,[40] but by moving more passengers at peak, with more comfort and, yes, more style than a bus, it would allow developers to better sell their properties to prospective buyers and renters. With a streetcar on the way, developers would be more willing to spring for higher density, more willing to follow the Plan, and more willing to build committed affordable housing.

This is a strong argument. It is also highly technical and required three paragraphs to explain. The argument also did not respond to the immediate, short-term concerns residents had about gentrification and displacement on the Pike. Even under the most optimistic scenario, where the streetcar line is built and every developer wants to build at higher densities, the existing affordable garden apartments still would be bulldozed to make way for high-end condo and apartment developments. To be sure, these new higher-density and upscale development would contain a certain number of committed affordable units (as a result of the "density for affordable housing" bargain set up by the Neighborhoods Plan). But

---

[40] As one supporter put it, "at least with a streetcar you provide at least more of a sense of reliability that the route will not change and you can build your business around a route that is stable."

this would be cold comfort in the short-term for existing residents on the Pike, whose garden apartments were demolished to make way for the new, walkable, transit-oriented corridor.

To their credit, supporters acknowledged this short-term loss in interviews. But, they argued, those garden apartments are doomed anyway. The only question is this: can we get developers to the negotiating table, where we can give them more density in exchange for committed affordable units? If not, we lose on both fronts. We get no garden apartments and no committed affordable units. Again, this is a rational argument. It also likely inspired little enthusiasm among existing residents concerned about gentrification. For these residents, the argument came down to this: move now (and perhaps come back to compete with thousands of other families for one of the new, committed units built within this otherwise upscale developments) or move later (when your garden apartment is redeveloped anyway).

Overall, then, supporters did not have an uplifting story to tell residents concerned about gentrification. Indeed, one of the supporters' other arguments might have even compounded residents' fears of being displaced: the comparison to the Metro Orange Line and the subsequent development of the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor. Supporters repeatedly offered this comparison in interviews and in the blog comment fields. As one comment writer put it:

> I'm really disheartened by all the vitriol. Come on people. Look, if [the] comments board had existed when Arlington was mulling putting Metro stations underground in the 1960s I'm sure we would have heard the same arguments (Too expensive! Why not just run buses?) Does anyone TODAY think the Metro in Arlington was a bad idea? I don't. Look how the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor has boomed in the past 30 years.

In short, the argument goes, previous generations of Arlingtonians had the foresight to ignore the naysayers and spend the extra money to put the Orange Line underneath Wilson Boulevard (rather than taking the cheaper option and routing it through the middle of Interstate 66, as it does today in suburban Fairfax County). As multiple interviewees noted, this decision led to the development of Rosslyn, Clarendon, and Ballston, which in turn has powered the Arlington economy, allowing for investment in schools and services, while also keeping the residential tax rate relatively low (compared to other neighboring jurisdictions).

As supporters argued, given the historical success of transit-oriented development along the Orange Line, we need to do our part in our time. This is our Metro moment. One supporter put it this way:

> I might be the only Bluemont resident who supports the streetcar. Just because it won't benefit me personally in a direct way doesn't

mean I don't want to see it happen for those people who will. It is a truly once in a generation transportation improvement that can make real positive change for people who actually want and need it on Columbia Pike.

It is our turn, in short, to embrace the moment and invest in Arlington's future. And this means investing in the model of transit-oriented development that worked so well in sparking waves of growth along the Orange Line. It is time, as one writer concluded, to invest in transit and "truly unlock the potential of Columbia Pike" in "much the same way the Orange Line reinvigorated the Rosslyn to Ballston corridor."

However, given the role of the Orange Line corridor in the wider Arlington urban imaginary, this rhetorical celebration of transit-oriented development along the Orange line may have only fueled residents' fears of gentrification. As noted above, for many residents of South Arlington, the neighborhoods traversed by the Orange line—especially Clarendon, Courthouse, and Ballston—signify not merely "development," but more immediately "yuppies," "bros," and (less charitably) "d-bags." As preferred locales for affluent millennials, these neighborhoods offer a particularly high-end brand of urban living, complete with Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, and the occasional hedonistic bar crawl. And, with two-bedroom apartments renting for between $2500 and $5000 (and beyond),[41] the corridor is by no definition "affordable." For these reasons, drawing historical parallels between "the Orange Line" and "the Streetcar" was by no means a slam-dunk rhetorical strategy. Indeed, it arguably alienated as many locals as it persuaded. As one writer put it, "…only gentrifiers, yuppie white people and snoots want this streetcar."

In the end, the decision to kill the streetcar left supporters dejected and demoralized. The comment fields immediately after its cancellation were particularly poignant, as supporters equated the decision to oppose the streetcar with a selfish "turning-inward" or an "I got mine" politics that is taking hold not just in Arlington but elsewhere as well. As one supporter wrote:

> [T]his is the typical trajectory we're seeing all over the country. People get rich off the hard work, sacrifices, and foresight of the generation before them, then they want to "take theirs" and go sit on it. Why keep paying in when you can cash out? This is what the 40-60 year old set is doing en masse - never mind that they got ahead because of what the GI Bill, Social Security, etc. did for their

---

[41] "Homes for Rent: Clarendon-Courthouse," *Zillow* (website), accessed May 31, 2017 https://www.zillow.com/homes/for_rent/Clarendon.dash.Courthouse-Arlington-VA/condo,apartment_duplex_type/271695_rid/38.89406,-77.075234,38.889784,-77.08622_rect/16_zm/

parents' generation. All they want to do is cut, cut, cut. More money for me, me, me. There is no "us" anymore - it's just the rich saying they want to take their ball and go home. They'll buy their own insurance and send their own kids to their own private schools and drive their own cars on their toll roads. Everyone else can just starve, and any effort to avert that is just tax-and-spend liberals trying to waste their precious money, or so they cry 24 hours a day to anyone who will hear them.

For some supporters, then, the death of the streetcar was viewed as a sobering reminder that no localities were immune to the wave of right-wing populist sentiment sweeping through the larger political sphere, culminating of course in the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. Presidency. The streetcar debate, as one affordable housing activist said in an interview, was when this cyclone touched down in Arlington.

Conclusion

This paper began with two questions: What can the demise of the Arlington Streetcar project tell us about the cultural politics, especially the class politics, of smart growth planning, particularly in the current political conjuncture? And, in a more applied vein, how can advocates who wish to move urban planning beyond the automobile learn from the political failure of transit in Virginia's most liberal-progressive locality? In response to the first question, it seems clear that questions of social class and inequality tied streetcar supporters in rhetorical knots.

First, supporters, at least in the blog comment fields of ARLNow.org, failed to directly address many residents' fears about gentrification and displacement on the Pike. By drawing instead on the fetishized term "development," supporters framed the coming of higher-density properties (with apartment rents between $2500 and $3500) as an uncontroversial good—particularly as an engine of increased tax revenue for Arlington as a whole. This likely had little resonance with residents more directly concerned with the future affordability and diversity of neighborhoods along the Pike.

Further, supporters no doubt thought that drawing on the success story of transit-oriented development along the Orange Line would be an effective argument. After all, these neighborhoods offer a vibrant mix of retail, restaurant, office, and residential spaces. They are very desirable places to visit, live, and work, and they generate an outsized percentage of the County's commercial tax revenue. Yet, as noted above, these neighborhoods are by no means affordable, and in the larger Arlington imaginary, they can be viewed as offering a "yoga, lattes, and Whole Foods" lifestyle to an exclusive segment of young and wealthy

professionals. Arguing that the streetcar represents this generation's opportunity to invest in transit—just like we did with the Orange Line—was, in hindsight, a risky rhetorical move. As some of the comments suggested, some South Arlington residents were by no means excited about the idea of bringing the "Orange Line" model down to Columbia Pike.

Taken together, this inability to grapple directly and convincingly with concerns about gentrification on the Pike allowed opponents—particularly AST and Libby Garvey—to stitch together a disparate coalition of those who feared the gentrification of the Pike, those who feared that the streetcar would siphon funds away from schools, and those who had more philosophical objections to higher-density urbanism and ambitious government projects. These groups, with their divergent concerns, nonetheless could be articulated together by AST under the common goal of killing the streetcar and *preserving* the status quo, both on Columbia Pike and in the Arlington polity more generally. For some, this meant preserving the Pike (and other neighborhoods in Arlington as much as possible) as low-density, car-oriented, and suburban in look and feel. For others, this meant disciplining a Board they felt had strayed from a preferred managerial focus on good roads and schools. And for still others, this meant preserving, for as long as possible, the Pike's status as Arlington's last bastion of class and racial diversity.

The rhetorical strategies of streetcar opponents—at least as represented in these blog comment fields—thus sought to cultivate and give voice to a series of multiple, sometimes overlapping, at other times contradictory fears and resentments. Fears of overcrowding schools, resentments about government "vanity projects," concerns about gentrification and displacement—AST embraced them all. It didn't really matter *why* you opposed the streetcar. Your opposition, your refusal was enough. Although emanating from a very different ideological and social position (i.e., both Garvey and Rousselot were staunch Democrats), this process of stitching multiple and even contradictory fears and resentments into a potent but fragile political fabric has obvious national resonances in the first year of a Trump presidency. Future research should explore these resonances with the aim of better understanding of how specific articulations and rhetorical strategies circulate not only among advocates in different localities (e.g., those engaged in transit debates elsewhere) but also among political actors across local, national, and even global scales—including, as applies here, across ideological or partisan lines.

Finally, the death of the Arlington Streetcar also holds some practical lessons for smart growth advocates moving forward. What this case suggests is that, if smart growth advocates wish to avoid similar defeats in other localities, they begin by sharpening up their ability to discuss issues of class inequality, cultural diversity, gentrification, and displacement. Let's be clear. The world needs smart growth principles. The looming catastrophe of climate change means that we can

no longer develop our cities and daily lives around the cul-de-sac, the eight-lane expressway, and the automobile. Yet at the same time, the case of Arlington Streetcar demonstrates that smart growth advocates can sometimes suffer from class-blindness and an inability to directly confront how entrenched social inequalities penetrate and distort all urban planning—even the most well-intentioned, environmentally sound plans. As Andrew Ross argues, our current metrics for judging sustainability or "green" urban development are technical in nature: "more solar roofs, less airborne particulates; more transit riders, less water use per capita; more housing density, less golf courses." This focus on sustainability metrics reflects a wider managerial worldview, which suggests that "the ecological crisis can be fixed by making slight technical adjustments to people's habits and interactions with their daily environment." [42]

Conversely, he writes, "there are no metrics for measuring environmental justice, no indicators of judging equity of access to the green life, and no technical quantum for assess the social sustainability of a population."[43] In this way, the danger of pursuing smart growth and transit-oriented development—without directly confronting class inequality and fears of gentrification—is that success will come to be defined in purely technical and managerial terms. Success is an award-winning Orange Line corridor where transit use is up and car trips are down, but, of course, this new green city lifestyle is available only to a privileged "creative class."[44] Success on Columbia Pike means more transit riders, more walking trips, fewer cars, and more committed affordable housing units, but this vision likely accelerates a process of gentrification and displacement already underway. As Ross concludes, "the vogue for green governance by the numbers is a recipe for managing, rather the correcting, inequality."[45]

This said, there are some hopeful signs that smart growth advocates are developing new ways to think about and address class inequality and affordable housing within their transit-oriented development plans. As noted above, the County's current model for creating new affordable housing units is parasitic. It gives commercial developers a density bonus in exchange for a small number of committed affordable units. However, without the prospect of new streetcar line, potential developers along the Pike now have much less incentive to build "above code" and thus less incentive to negotiate trade affordable units for density bonuses. As a result, the death of the streetcar has forced local officials and advocates to

---

[42] Andrew Ross, *Bird on Fire: Lessons from the World's Least Sustainable City* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 245.

[43] Ross, *Bird on Fire*, 245.

[44] Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class (And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life)* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

[45] Ross, *Bird on Fire*, 245.

rethink how to protect affordable housing on the Pike while at the same time holding true to the vision of walkable city living embodied in the Pike Neighborhoods Plan.[46]

In short, by failing so spectacularly and jumpstarting these discussions, the streetcar may actually end up contributing to the well-being of Pike residents. If these early ideas are pursued, and if this painful experience inspires Arlington's planners and community activists to confront more directly the wider tensions between smart growth urbanism and class inequality, the failed streetcar initiative, in a strange way, will have found a meaningful life after death.

---

[46] See, for example, Board candidate Erik Gutshall's discussion of developing the "missing middle" in Arlington's housing stock (http://erikgutshall.ngpvanhost.com/issues/missing-middle), and Board member Katie Cristol's plan to ease regulations that prevent the construction of micro-apartments, multi-family home sharing, or the construction of "mom-in-law" suites in existing neighborhoods (http://www.katiecristol.com/diversity_and_livability).

Bibliography

Alpert, David. "Is 'the GGW Agenda Dead? No, but It's Hard to Build Transit." *Greater Greater Washington* [blog], February 12, 2015. Accessed May 31, 2017. https://ggwash.org/view/37289/is-the-ggw-agenda-dead-no-but-its-hard-to-build-transit.

Arlington County. *Affordable Housing Master Plan*. Arlington, VA: Arlington County Government, September 2015. Accessed online May 31, 2017. http://housing.arlingtonva.us/affordable-housing-master-plan/.

Balingit, Moriah. "Arlington School Officials Grapple with Overcrowding Plan for New Middle Schools," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2014.

Cain, A., J. Flynn, M. McCourt, and T. Reyes, *Quantifying the importance of image and perception to Bus Rapid Transit*. Tampa, FL: National Bus Rapid Transit Institute, Center for Urban Transportation Research, 2009.

Chadha, Monica. "The Neighborhood Hyperlocal." *Digital Journalism* 4, no. 6 (2016): 743–63.

Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014.

Columbia Pike Initiative. *Columbia Pike Initiative: A Revitalization Plan, Volumes I and II*. Arlington, VA: Department of Community Planning, Housing, and Development, 2002. Accessed May 31, 2017. https://projects.arlingtonva.us/neighborhoods/columbia-pike-planning/

Columbia Pike Land Use and Housing Study Group. *Columbia Pike Neighborhoods Area Plan*. Arlington, VA: Arlington County Government, 2012. Accessed May 31, 2017, https://projects.arlingtonva.us/neighborhoods/columbia-pike-planning/

Robert Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public opinion, and US Foreign Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Florida, Richard. *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

Freilich, Robert, Robert Sitkowski, and Set Mennillo. *From Sprawl to Sustainability: Smart Growth, New Urbanism, Green Development, and Renewable Energy*. Chicago: American Bar Association, 2010.

Gibson, Timothy. "The Trope of the Organic City." *Space and Culture* 6, no. 4 (2003): 429-448.

Grossberg, Lawrence. "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 45–60.

Hall, Stuart. "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 5–27.

Hall, Stuart. "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 28-44.

Hall, Stuart, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1978/2013.

HR&A Advisors. *Columbia Pike Transit Initiative: Comparative Return on Investment Study.* Washington, DC: HR&A Advisors, March 2014. Accessed May 31, 2017. http://projects.arlingtonva.us/plans-studies/transportation/columbia-pike-transit-initiative/

Kaufman, Rachael. "Arlington's Streetcar is Dead. Now what?" *Next City* [blog]. Accessed May 31, 2017. https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/arlington-streetcar-failure-future

Laclau, Ernesto. *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*. London: Verso, 1977.

Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 1985.

Moshe Ben-Akiva and Takayuki Morikawa, "Comparing Ridership Attraction of Rail and Bus." *Transport Policy* 9, no. 2 (2002): 107-116.

Papacharissi, Zizi. *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Pike Transit Initiative. *Alternative Analysis/Environmental Analysis, vol. 1*. Arlington, VA: Arlington County Government, May 2012. Accessed May 31, 2017. https://projects.arlingtonva.us/plans-studies/transportation/columbia-pike-transit-initiative/

Pike Transit Initiative. *Locally Preferred Alternative Report*. Arlington, VA: Arlington County Government, July 2012. Accessed May 31, 2017. http://projects.arlingtonva.us/plans-studies/transportation/columbia-pike-transit-initiative/

Radway, Janice. "Identifying Ideological Seams: Mass Culture, Analytical Method, and Political Practice." *Communication* 9 (1986): 93-124.

Ross, Andrew. *Bird on Fire: Lessons from the World's Least Sustainable City*. New York: Oxford, 2011.

Singer, Audrey, Samantha Friedman, Ivan Cheung, and Marie Price, *The World in a Zip Code: Greater Washington, D.C. as a New Region of Immigration*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2001. Accessed May 31, 2017. http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2001/04/washington-dc-singer

Sullivan, Patricia and Antonio Olivo. "Arlington Officials to Halt Work on Columbia Pike, Crystal City Streetcar Projects." *Washington Post*, November 18, 2014.

Sullivan, Patricia. "Bond Decisions for Arlington Voters." *Washington Post*, October 13, 2012.

Sullivan, Patricia. "Arlington Board Election Focuses on Streetcar Debate." *Washington Post*, October, 21, 2012.

Sullivan, Patricia. "Arlington County Board Endorses Columbia Pike Streetcar Project." *Washington Post*, July 24, 2012.

Sullivan, Patricia. "Arlington's Long Bridge Park Aquatics Center is in Limbo because of Ballooning Costs." *Washington Post*, January 11, 2014

Sullivan, Patricia. "More State Money to Fund Contentious Arlington Streetcar." *Washington Post*, July 20, 2014.

Todd, Graham, and Scott Wright. "A Tale of Two Stories from 'Below the Line': Comment Fields at the Guardian." *The International Journal of Press/Politics 20,* no. 3 (2015): 317–38