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De Blasio gives Diamond hope for Red Hook trolley plan



Brooklyn transit buff Robert Diamond is seen inside one of his PCC streetcars "back in the day," when it looked like his Red Hook trolley plan was about to start rolling. Eagle file photo

By Raanan Geberer
Brooklyn Daily Eagle

Transit buff Robert Diamond -- whose plans for a trolley system serving Red Hook were at first supported by the city Department of Transportation (DOT) but then stymied by the agency in 2003 after he had already laid tracks on local streets -- feels that the election of Mayor-elect Bill de Blasio may provide new hope for the scheme.

Diamond also was the discoverer of the abandoned, circa-1844 Long Island Rail Road tunnel under Atlantic Avenue near Cobble Hill and Brooklyn Heights. His tours of the tunnel were popular for years until the DOT put the kibosh on these tours as well on the grounds that there was one entranceway into the tunnel (through a manhole cover), which they said could be a fire hazard.

Some observers at the time felt that the city might be

interested in the trolley plan, but wanted Diamond himself out of the picture. That idea was proven false in 2011. Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez funded a study of the idea, but the DOT claimed that the line would cost too much for too few riders, wouldn't substantially reduce commuting times, and that it would be difficult to run streetcars through the area's narrow streets.

Writing to the *Eagle*, Diamond said, "Under the de Blasio administration, the outer boroughs will get the equal development opportunities they sorely need and deserve, and Red Hook is the natural place to start. The Red Hook streetcar project is key to the long-awaited redevelopment of Red Hook.

"Being a creature of the world of multinational corporations and high finance, the Bloomberg Administration tended to isolate itself from community leaders and the public in general. It was as though the administration only heard the voices of big business and huge corporations, and failed to respond to ideas or concerns which were 'bubbling up from the grass roots level,'" Diamond continued.

"Finally, all NYC agency heads serve at the pleasure of the mayor. A new mayor means new agency heads and a fresh start with a clean slate," said Diamond, who publicly criticized several DOT officials and started a lawsuit at one point.

"With all of these crucial factors now in play, I've never been more optimistic that the Red Hook streetcar project, and the Atlantic Avenue tunnel project, finally have a real chance of coming off the drawing board and becoming physical reality," Diamond added.

Another factor giving Diamond hope is the fact that during the past year, the Gowanus Canal Community Development Corporation and local businessman John Quadrozzi have endorsed the project. In the past, Diamond relied almost exclusively on volunteers from his Brooklyn Historic Railway Association (BHRA).

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While the Eagle wasn't able to contact the Gowanus development group, its founder, Buddy Scotto, recently told Crain's, "When I go to San Francisco, I like to ride the trolley. That's what we're going to do for Red Hook."

In preparation for his project, Diamond during the 1990s amassed a fleet of early-1950s PCC streetcars which had once run on the Buffalo and Boston systems. Some were stored at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, then repossessed. Others are "parked" near the Red Hook Fairway, where Diamond once had his headquarters, and have been slowly deteriorating.

Outgoing Red Hook Councilwoman Sara Gonzalez said recently, "In an area as transit-starved as Red Hook, I am supportive of alternative modes of transportation, and in particular, I think the idea of returning trolley service as proposed by Mr. Diamond is worth examining further."

Electric trolleys once ran through the streets of Brooklyn, but were gradually replaced by buses after World War II. The last two routes, on McDonald Avenue and Church Avenue, were discontinued in late 1956.

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