Trackless Trolleys : The Pollution Free Solution.
By Richard Parker

New government financing for transportation infrastructure could offer Rhode Island a pollution free opportunity. One way to do this is to bring back an old friend to Rhode Island, the trackless trolley.

Thoroughly modern cities such as Seattle and San Francisco have enthusiastically made trackless trolleys the mainstay of their transportation systems. Electrically driven through overhead wires, these rubber tired vehicles can move around obstructions and pick up passengers from the sidewalk. A practically noiseless, pollution free, passenger friendly vehicle, with no conventional motor to wear out, maintenance costs are relatively low making trackless trolleys, and a financial bargain as well.

So why were trackless trolleys abandoned in Rhode Island? It all began with the 1929 depression. Narragansett Electric which through its subsidiary the United Electric Railway, known as the UER, owned and operated an aging fleet of conventional trolley cars that ran on tracks, was concerned that its cars after years of service, were finally wearing out. The problem was gas busses, considered to be the wave of the future, were the probable replacement for the worn out trolley cars. If adopted in Rhode Island gas busses would further cut back on the use of electricity. Narragansett Electric was already in trouble as the depression wreaked havoc on the economy of the state and the use of electricity continued to go down. With cut-backs continuing in manufacturing facilities and reduced household use as families doubled up, there was cause for serious concern

There was however a ray of hope. Officials of Narragansett Electric began to hear reports of a new and exciting electrically powered vehicle, the trackless trolley, sometimes referred to as a trolley bus. My father, Carleton Parker, a graduate of Brown University's electrical engineering department was given the assignment by Narragansett Electric to explore the possibility of trackless trolleys for Rhode Island. He visited several cities and found universal acceptance from both the passengers and the management of the trolley companies. It was a total win-win situation and Narragansett and the UER were pleased to accept the report and make trackless trolley the new transportation vehicle for northern Rhode Island. My father, charged with the engineering of the change over worked long hours over the details. Trackless trolley routes eventually included in Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls, Cranston and parts of Warwick.

In the bleak depression year of 1931, several years before the New Deal began to give hope, Armistice Boulevard, in Pawtucket was selected to be the first trackless trolley route in New England. The arrival of trackless trolley was of great importance to the people of Rhode Island. While business all around were cutting back or closing down, a new and exciting mode of transportation had arrived.

For the inaugural run, just about every politician in the state was in attendance, including the outspoken mayor of Pawtucket: Thomas Patrick McCoy wearing his traditional derby. Along with the politicians, the Chambers of Commerce and other business organizations, religious leaders, police and fire chiefs lined up to be photographed. It was a brisk December day, and everyone wore overcoats and fedoras, the

standard felt hat of the day. The drivers stood by their trolleys wearing jackets and caps. Officials from Brill, the manufacturer of the trolley busses were there, as well as management people from Narragansett Electric, including my father's boss Cap Williams, the general manager of UER. My father, as the engineer in charge was included in the group photo of Narragansett Electric, planed a complete changeover of the trolley company to make trackless trolley a viable transportation vehicle throughout the northern part of Rhode Island. It was a major endeavor, but with much effort and complete coordination between Narragansett Electric and UER, it was accomplished in a relatively short time. Installing the overhead wiring system took considerable work in laying it out and much physical work by the traction crews to install it. The new system required different overhead wiring than that used by street cars, where one overhead wire and one pole had been enough as the steel rails provided the negative. As trackless trolleys ran on rubber tires rather than steel rails the overhead wiring now consisted of two wires, with two poles on the trolleys reaching up to the wires, one providing positive current the other negative.

This new transportation vehicle soon proved to be a success in both rider satisfaction and company profit. A ride in the new silent and comfortable vehicles only cost ten cents, a token reduced the price to seven cents. The UER could provide this inexpensive system as the electricity came from the parent company, Narragansett Electric, at low cost. With their simplified electric motors, the trolley bus could last years with little maintenance. As an example of the long life of trackless trolleys, in Philadelphia, trolley busses purchased in 1947 remained in service until 1980, 33 years.

In World War II, gasoline shortages brought additional riders at no extra costs to the trolley company and profits rolled in for Narragansett Electric. But in 1951 disaster struck. The Securities and Exchange Commission in Washington decided that combined utility companies hindered competition and those companies that combined both gas and electricity were ordered to split up. In Pawtucket the Blackstone Valley Gas and Electric was forced to become two separate companies. In Providence the gas and electric companies had been separate entities for years, but that did not stop the SEC. They decided that the combination of Narragansett Electric and the trolley company somehow reduced competition and that they had to split up.

The nonsense of this decision is apparent and baffling. Today, with the exception of the State owned and money losing gas bus company, all of the forced split-ups have been recombined with a vengeance, with only a few giant, and often foreign utility companies dominating the industry. Even Providence Gas, spared from the original breakup is now combined with Narragansett Electric under the umbrella of the British owned utility giant, National Grid.

In the wake of the SEC decision, Narragansett Electric was forced to sell the trolley company. This very profitable entity was purchased by What Cheer Associates, a group more involved in liquidation than transportation. After the forced sale, What Cheer demanded that Narragansett Electric sell them electricity at the same price that Narragansett had charged the trolley company when they owned it. Narragansett Electric replied that by law that they had to sell What Cheer electricity as the same price as any other commercial entity.

In that case said What Cheer we will throw out the trackless trolleys and go to gas busses. That the trolley busses had many more years of service in them was of no interest to What Cheer, and many were sold, some going on for years in other cities in America and even foreign countries, the rest just junked. Immediate profit for What Cheer came from selling off the miles of overhead wiring, some of which had been installed only a few years earlier.

It was not very long before the formerly profitable and user-friendly transportation system, now ineptly managed, its schedules in shambles, was in serious financial difficulties. Because of the poor maintenance the busses soon became enveloped in noxious fumes and with other serious mechanical difficulties that made riding in them unpleasant and uncomfortable. Before long no one wanted to ride the busses any more. It got so bad that the drivers eventually went on strike, not for more money, but against management, because management was so bad that the drivers were afraid that the bus company could go bankrupt and the drivers would lose their jobs. The strike didn't work, nothing worked, it was a complete disaster in every way. Eventually the bus company had to be taken over by the state. Today it runs at a loss, the deficit picked up by the taxpayers and the all gas bus fleet continues to go on its polluting ways

Recently, gasoline prices, which had been absurdly high, came down, but are drifting up again. In any event, financially, or from the passenger point of view, constantly polluting gas busses are a looser and substitutes are being considered. Some favor streetcars that run on tracks. While this has some merit, especially for interurban transportation, it makes less sense in the city. Tearing up miles of roads And inserting tracks made from expensive railroad steel would take much time and would be needlessly expensive. As no streetcars have been made in America for many years when Portland Oregon instituted a streetcar line they had to go to the Czech Republic for their cars. Not exactly an easy way to do business.

Installing a trackless trolley lines, on the other hand, would require minimum disruption of streets, as the overhead wires would be relatively simple to install. As help is needed now, rather than years from now, trackless trolleys is the passenger pleasing, quiet, nonpolluting way to go. The possible acquisition of hybrid busses would be a good combination with trackless as there are many areas in Rhode Island where it would not be economically feasible to install wiring.