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THE BOROUGH'S RICHES, A TROLLEY RIDE AWAY by Tara Colton

Several civic organizations are trying to expose residents and tourists alike to some of the city's lesser-known or harder-to-reach cultural offerings. But who's got a ticket to ride?

An excerpt from the report, [A Bumpy Ride](#), published by the Center for an Urban Future, City Limits' sister policy institute:

Cultural trolleys clearly have the potential to improve access to museums, zoos, galleries, concert halls and shopping districts that are located outside the city's main cultural and tourist districts. They offer a convenient and safe way for tourists and New Yorkers to explore cultural treasures outside Manhattan that aren't very well known or easily accessible by public transit. In doing so, they help bring in new customers to neighborhood shops and restaurants. They can also provide a highly visible marketing tool for local institutions.

Unfortunately, trolleys have not been the magic bullet that some cultural leaders envisioned. The Queens Culture Trolley was discontinued in 2005 after woefully low ridership and the Heart of Brooklyn (HOB) organization has recently embarked on a broad rethink of its own trolley program in hopes of averting the same fate. Only two of the city's major cultural trolleys are considered truly successful—the **Bronx Culture Trolley** and Flushing Town Hall's Queens Jazz Trail Trolley.

While the HOB Trolley is fairly successful as a marketing symbol for Prospect Park and provides a pleasant and convenient service for many families in the neighborhoods that surround the park, there is little evidence that it substantially boosts attendance at the five cultural institutions that are on the route. In fact, the leaders of all five Brooklyn cultural sites served by the trolley expressed disappointment with the program. "The trolley's impact has been marginal at best," says a leader at one HOB institution.

The Brooklyn trolley rarely exceeds a handful of passengers per trip, and few of the passengers actually get off the trolley and walk through the doors of one of the HOB institutions. Even the **Bronx Culture Trolley**, while considered successful, typically has no more than 100 riders on the nights when it runs. And the trolley serving City Island, a sleepy fishing village in the Northeast Bronx that has great potential as a tourist attraction, sometimes has had as few as one rider.

A big part of the problem is that service is often too infrequent for riders to consider the trolleys reliable forms of transportation. The HOB Trolley runs once an hour; the now-defunct Queens Culture Trolley made one circuit every 90 minutes. By comparison, thriving trolleys in Philadelphia and San Diego show up between three and five times an hour at each stop. The result is that many New Yorkers use the trolleys opportunistically, jumping on when it shows up to catch a ride to the subway station or wherever they do their shopping. Meanwhile, tourists are hesitant to hop on if they could be stranded in an unfamiliar neighborhood with an hour-long wait to be picked up.

Interestingly, the most successful cultural trolleys in the city have gotten around this problem not by increasing the frequency of service but by limiting the number of days in operation. Understanding that they don't have the resources to pick up visitors frequently enough to make them attractive as transportation systems, both the **Bronx Culture Trolley** and Flushing Town Hall's Queens Jazz Trail Trolley have opted not to offer regular service on weekends. Instead, their trolleys run one day a month—and those rides are well-publicized and carefully programmed. In essence, the trolley becomes a special event in its own right, not merely a means of transportation. And local residents and tourists know exactly when they need to show up and what they can expect.

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“Cultural trolleys have had a mixed track record of success in New York City,” says Kate D. Levin, commissioner of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. “Flushing Town Hall’s Jazz Trail Trolley and the **Bronx Culture Trolley** do very well at attracting audiences because both have strong programming as part of the experience. Trolleys that serve more as a means of transportation tend not to be as effective in drawing audiences to cultural destinations because the city’s strong public transportation system provides a viable means of traveling around the city quickly and easily.”

Another problem is that most of the city’s cultural trolleys simply aren’t well known. Promoting these routes is vitally important—but it isn’t cheap, and most of the trolleys don’t have significant marketing budgets. The exception is the **Bronx Culture Trolley**, and experts interviewed for this report say it’s not a coincidence that the huge amount of time and money the organizers have put into planning and promoting it has led to the most successful trolley venture in the city. The **Bronx Council on the Arts** (BCA) spends upwards of \$150,000 to plan and promote each year’s set of trolley nights, and its investment has paid off: 84 percent of riders surveyed by BCA said they would ride the trolley again, and more than half reported that they spent money at local restaurants and cafés the nights the trolley ran.

For most of the other trolleys in New York, however, marketing has been an afterthought. None of the HOB institutions advertise the trolley on the home pages of their websites, though HOB and several of the Brooklyn institutions do list the trolley on the pages of their sites that provide directions. By contrast, Gray Line New York, a private tour bus company that shuttles tourists to different parts of the five boroughs, prints three million brochures a year and sends them out all over the world.

To be fair, the trolleys aren’t getting much help in this regard from the two agencies that can do the most to promote attractions in the boroughs: NYC & Co., the city’s convention and visitors’ bureau, and I Love New York, the state’s tourism agency. Currently, the only local trolley that is mentioned on either government website is the **Bronx Culture Trolley**. Both entities, as well as other city and state agencies, could help by providing publicity, advertising tie-ins and assistance in getting borough-based trolleys on the radar of tour operators.

Adding to the difficulties is the fact that the high costs of gas and insurance render trolleys very expensive to run. The replica old-time trolleys may be charming, but they also guzzle gas and are prone to breakdowns.

The Center for an Urban Future believes there is a place for trolleys in New York City. Dozens of cultural institutions lie out of sight and mind for tourists and locals alike, located in neighborhoods that are a considerable distance from public transit and are hard to access without a car. Trolleys can help solve both problems, raising awareness of these attractions and bringing potential visitors to the front door. The success of the **Bronx Culture Trolley** is a case in point. But without a clear focus on either goal, and with inadequate marketing, the trolleys are falling short on both. The HOB Trolley offers perhaps the clearest illustration of this identity crisis: is it an attraction in its own right? A marketing tool for the institutions it serves? A transportation system for local residents? All of the above?

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To read more of "A Bumpy Ride," click [here](#).