



City of Omaha
Jean Stothert, Mayor

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June 5, 2024

Senator Mike McDonnell
Nebraska Legislature, District 5
State Capitol
P.O. Box 946-4
Lincoln, NE 68509-4604
Email: mmcdonnell@leg.ne.gov

Dear Senator McDonnell:

I am writing in response to the letter you sent me and Councilman Festersen dated May 31, 2024. Your letter states your opinion that the bonds issued by the City of Omaha for the modern streetcar should be put to a public vote. This letter serves as my reply to your position.

As you know, Nebraska law does not require a public vote in order to issue the bonds used to fund the streetcar. These types of bonds are routinely used by the City and the fact that you feel they should have been placed on a ballot does not change that.

You have served in the legislature for eight years and have not made any meaningful effort to change this law. Your letter references LB 1359, a bill you proposed to require such a vote. However, your letter omitted the fact that you did not prioritize this bill or made any effort to advance it for the legislature to vote. I can only assume you proposed this legislation so you could eventually write a letter such as the one you sent on May 31, 2024. For you to criticize me and the City Council for not asking the voters to approve this project is hypocritical. The City is complying with the laws passed by the legislature, of which you are a member.

Your letter perpetuates the myth that the streetcar will cause financial ruin for the City. That is simply not true. The funding for the streetcar was analyzed and verified by an independent organization. Even using a very conservative outlook, this organization validated the funding model to pay for the streetcar. I promised the people of Omaha that the streetcar would be funded and operated without a tax increase. I have upheld this promise by not raising taxes and repeatedly lowering our levy.

It is the job of elected officials to make decisions on behalf of the people we represent. Whether you are the Mayor, a member of the City Council or a state senator, our job is to make decisions. During my time as Mayor, I have made numerous decisions for the City of Omaha because that is my job as the chief executive officer of the City. The modern streetcar project is no different.

I was not alone in the decision to move forward with streetcar. Members of the City Council stand with me and their votes have shown a commitment to this endeavor. This is an example of elected officials working together to benefit the public that they serve.

During your time in the legislature, you have been involved and voted on projects that exceed the cost of the streetcar. Did the legislature put them up for a vote of the people? Did the citizens of Nebraska get to vote on how federal economic recovery was distributed was used? The answer to both of these questions is no. If you feel strongly that the public should vote on the streetcar project because of its size or scope, then this must be a recent revelation. You serve on the Appropriations committee and the Economic Recovery Special committee. Both of these committees were involved in making multi-million-dollar decisions but none of them appeared on the ballot. Just like me and the City Council, you were elected to make these decisions and the law does not require a vote of the people. Again, this hypocritical stance makes me question the motivation and timing of your recent letter.

The public has and continues to have the opportunity to learn, speak and question the streetcar. Every vote the City Council has had on this issue has been held in public and after a public hearing. The meetings of the Omaha Streetcar Authority are open to the public and they have a right to speak at these meetings.

The streetcar project will move forward. This undertaking will be monumental for Omaha. It will revitalize our urban core, bring more people to downtown and will spark economic development for housing, business and entertainment. There have already been examples of this and construction has not even begun. If you took the time to learn more about the project, how it is funded and how it will benefit Omaha, your opinion should change. Do you not support the continued growth and momentum of Omaha?

Sincerely,



Jean Stothert
Mayor of Omaha

cc: Council President Pete Festersen
Councilmember Juanita Johnson
Councilmember Danny Begley
Councilmember Ron Hug
Councilmember Don Rowe
Councilmember Brinker Harding
Councilmember Aimee Melton
James Dowding, Chief of Staff