

LIGHT RAIL CAN FUEL GROWTH, EXPERTS SAY

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Modern light-rail transit systems can be potent generators of urban economic growth, officials and experts said at a conference in Richmond yesterday.

"You can make a lot of money if you do things right," said Peter Newman, an Australian authority on sustainable cities and Fulbright Senior Scholar at the University of Virginia.

America's sparkling example of transit-oriented development is Portland, Ore.

Portland's privately developed central-city streetcar system prompted 7,248 new housing units and \$2.39 billion in private investment within two blocks of its lines, said Rick Gustafson, chief operating officer of Portland Streetcar Inc.

"This isn't a special-interest, cutesy kind of thing," Richmond City Councilman William J. Pantele said at the Virginia Light Rail Symposium. "It's about quality of life."

But getting to that quality is expensive.

"The big obstacle is money," said Christopher Zimmerman, chairman of the Arlington County Board of Supervisors. Arlington is considering a modern streetcar line for its Columbia Pike corridor.

Light-rail systems cost \$35 million to \$60 million per mile to build, Washington lawyer and transit advocate Jeffrey F. Boothe said.

And, he cautioned, "Somebody else's experience you can't extrapolate to your own."

Light-rail systems carry their passengers in single cars or short trains powered by electricity.

Relatively smaller and slower lines are considered streetcar or trolley systems, while light rail frequently refers to street-level railways moving larger numbers of riders rapidly between more widely spaced stations.

Light rail was born in Richmond in 1888 when engineer and entrepreneur Frank J. Sprague started the world's first successful electric trolley system. Buses replaced streetcars here in 1949.

No light railways run now in Virginia, but five localities, including Arlington, have projects on the table.

Norfolk's \$232 million system is the closest to construction: The 7.4-mile line is set to open in late 2009 or early 2010.

About 150 planners, officials, environmentalists, businesspeople, rail advocates and students gathered at the symposium at the Science Museum of Virginia to learn what it takes to get the street railways on track.

Richmond, Charlottesville and Roanoke are also considering building light-rail systems.

"I was skeptical that a streetcar line of proper length and location could attract investors and population to the inner city," said development consultant Bern Ewert of Charlottesville. "I'm now convinced.

"That's important," said Ewert, "because inner cities in Virginia are losing population."