

## **Light rail: born and reborn in Virginia**

*Norfolk is planning to build a system, and other localities have expressed an interest*

BY PETER BACQUE

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Monday, November 13, 2006

### **RELATED: [Transportation](#)**

Streetcars first ran in Virginia.

But trolleys have been gone from the state's urban areas for more than half a century.

They could be making a return.

Norfolk is on track to build a light-rail transit system. Arlington and Fairfax counties are backing light rail for the busy Columbia Pike corridor.

Richmond, Charlottesville and Roanoke also have expressed interest in reviving tramways in their crowded urban corridors.

"There's been something of a renaissance in light rail," said Pierce Homer, the state's secretary of transportation. "It's a fairly significant trend in transportation planning."

But right now, the number of light-rail systems running on Virginia cities' streets is zero.

"It's just expensive as can be to build," explained Larry Hagin, director of planning and government relations with Richmond's GRTC public transit system.

A group of rail advocates, localities, business interests, environmentalists and transit systems are putting on the Virginia Light Rail Symposium on Friday at the Science Museum of Virginia in Richmond to tout light rail's possibilities for helping reduce congestion of metropolitan transportation arteries.

"It's an educational event," said Michael Testerman, president of the Virginia Association of Railway Patrons and one of the symposium's organizers, tying in Virginia's incubating light-rail projects with global efforts to reintroduce the veteran form of urban mass transit.

Washington's wildly successful Metro is considered a heavy-rail system. Its high-

speed, multicar trains carry large numbers of riders and run in subway tubes and separated rights of way served by large, sophisticated stations.

The trendy name for streetcars or trolleys, light-rail systems are electric railways geared to carry relatively small volumes of passenger traffic. Normally powered by overhead electrical wires, the cars can be operated singly or in short trains.

Richmond has recently considered a light-rail system connecting the Boulevard and Shockoe Bottom and carrying 1,000-3,000 riders a day. Estimated price tag: \$151 million to build and \$1.2 million a year to operate.

The idea has not gone beyond the study stage.

"This is a very expensive project," Richmond transportation planner Viktoria Badger said. "It's going to need a lot of champions to move it forward."

The capital city's costly dilemma echoes across the state.

"In an era of extremely constrained transportation funding," Homer said, "economic viability is a key issue, perhaps the key issue" in developing such pricey mass transit projects.

Illustrating the tightness of those financial constraints, this year the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation will invest only about \$150 million of state funds in local public transit systems.

Of that, about \$105 million will underwrite operating expenses, while \$39 million is tagged for capital projects around the state.

"In the urban areas where the population density makes [light rail] potentially viable," said former Gov. Gerald L. Baliles, "you can make a good case for it, but as a supplement, not a substitute, for other modes of transportation."

Now the director of the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs, Baliles made transportation the centerpiece of his gubernatorial administration and has continued to stump for solutions to the state's growing traffic problems.

The private auto running on public highways is the primary mode of transportation in Virginia, which has more than 5.1 million licensed drivers and 7.3 million vehicles.

That works out to 126 vehicles for every mile of highway in Virginia and nearly one vehicle for each of the state's 7.5 million residents.

Virginia highway usage -- measured in vehicle-miles traveled -- grew 24.3 percent

from 1990 to 2000, said Richard L. Walton Jr., chief of policy, planning and the environment with the Virginia Department of Transportation.

Nationally, however, transit use increased only 6.4 percent in the same period, according to the American Public Transportation Association in Washington.

Mass-transit systems depend heavily on large infusions of federal money to get them built and then to keep them running. And "the feds have more requests than they can deal with," noted Ronald F. Kirby, transportation planning director with the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments.

As proposed, the Norfolk light-rail transit project would extend 7.4 miles from the Eastern Virginia Medical Center through downtown Norfolk along the Interstate 264 corridor to Newtown Road in the city.

Officials expect the project will cost \$232 million, according to James P. Toscano with Hampton Roads Transit, the regional transit agency in southeastern Virginia sponsoring the system.

More than half of the money -- \$164 million -- for Norfolk's light rail will come from the federal government, with the state ponying up about \$29 million and Norfolk providing \$39 million.

Hampton Roads Transit thinks 6,000 to 12,000 riders will use the light-rail system daily after it goes into operation in late 2009 or early 2010, Toscano said.

Putting the projected light-rail ridership in perspective, Hagin said some of GRTC's best-performing bus routes carry 2,000 to 3,000 passenger trips a day. But a city bus carrying 43 to 44 passengers costs only about \$300,000, said GRTC's Hagin.

Picking the right mass transportation mode for a community is best done case by case, said consulting engineer Jay Evans in a study presented at the 2005 Institute of Transportation Engineers conference.

"No rapid transit mode appears singly superior in all contexts," the Washington-based Evans said, "and consideration of 'right-sizing' should be paramount in decision making."

Balanced against the staggering costs of light-rail systems, transit planners and light-rail backers say, are the environmental benefits and urban revitalization that spring from light-rail systems.

For instance, Norfolk is touting a \$40 million, 250-unit residential project under

way along the proposed light-rail line as the port city's first designed to take advantage of the route.

"We are excited that the development community sees this as an opportunity to create smart growth and shape development patterns for the future," Toscano said.

Portland, Ore., reported that more than \$3 billion in economic development has occurred within walking distance of its light-rail stations since the metropolitan transportation district began planning the 38-mile system in the late 1970s.

"It's a definite economic generator," Richmond's Badger said, holding up the Portland example.

And light rail takes pollution-spewing cars off the streets.

While admittedly large users of energy, public-transit vehicles consume less energy per passenger-mile than automobiles because they carry so many people, the American Public Transportation Association says. Since they are electrically propelled, light-rail cars also emit little or no pollution.

Virginia's General Assembly recently held a special session devoted to finding money to fix the commonwealth's transportation woes but failed to reach a compromise.

"If it's difficult to secure funding for roads and bridges," Baliles said, "that would suggest that light rail's prospects might not be good either."

In the meantime, the state economy and quality of life could be placed in jeopardy, the "transportation governor" said.

"The purpose of a transportation system is to move people and products from one place to another," Baliles said.

"If the commonwealth cannot do that," he said, "then it cannot compete, and its economy cannot grow. It's that fundamental."

Contact staff writer Peter Bacqué at [pbacque@timesdispatch.com](mailto:pbacque@timesdispatch.com) or (804) 649-6813.

**This story can be found at:**

[http://www.timesdispatch.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=RTD%2FMGArticle%2FRTD\\_BasicArticle&c=MGArticle&cid=1149191662872&path=%21news&s=1045855934842](http://www.timesdispatch.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=RTD%2FMGArticle%2FRTD_BasicArticle&c=MGArticle&cid=1149191662872&path=%21news&s=1045855934842)