

COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE: Looking anew at streetcars and other downtown transit

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TIMES-DISPATCH COLUMNIST

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In October 2003, I wrote a column titled "Streetcars can put the city on right track."

At the time I really thought that the re-entry of the streetcar to Richmond the first city in the world, in 1888, to have a successful commercial streetcar system would be a natural.

During the three years since I wrote the article, which was the result of a study led by the GRTC Transit System, I have been involved with an unofficial committee that explored the possibilities of bringing the streetcar back to downtown Richmond. I attended the Virginia Light Rail Symposium last month at the Science Museum of Virginia.

Here's what I have learned during this time period:

- * As several of the speakers at the symposium noted, the main reason for introducing light rail was as a tool for economic development.
- * The cost of laying track in downtown Richmond is prohibitively expensive.
- * The time from inception to completion of even a modest system is quite long, particularly if federal funding is involved.
- * There is additional cost involved because a special maintenance facility has to be built.
- * For the system to really work, there needs to be regional cooperation.

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I will address some of these points.

- * Economic development Richmond is far different from cities such as Portland, Ore., which had virtually no downtown left when the light-rail project was proposed in the early 1980s.

When the plan went into effect in Portland, developers were encouraged to build high-density multiuse projects with very little parking. Developers were taxed within three blocks on either side of the right of way -- the idea was to discourage the use of cars in the light-rail right of way.

It worked! Today Portland has a thriving downtown where people live and work, and the system has been expanded several times.

In Richmond, we have achieved the economic redevelopment of downtown by providing real estate tax incentives to developers.

The result is the housing boom that we have experienced in the past decade, with the conversion of warehouses and office buildings to residential units, among other redevelopment. The renaissance continues with new residential construction, too.

* Laying track downtown --When I participated on the unofficial streetcar committee, we held a meeting and invited Dominion Virginia Power, among others, to attend.

We were stunned when the engineer indicated that not only is there a utility city under West Broad Street but there would be no guarantee that electrical service would not be intermittently interrupted by the power company when it needed to work on projects or repairs. The disruptions could be a matter of hours, days or even weeks.

That was an eye-opener. After all, if your transportation system isn't reliable, who will ride it?

The other issue is, where would the rail go? If you made a mistake with the route, you were basically stuck. Tracks are not flexible.

* Time and maintenance -- In all probability, there would be a need for federal and state funding for Richmond to move forward with a streetcar system.

A seven- to 10-year period from start to finish would be required to work our way through the system. We would have to fund a good portion of the proposal costs along the way, with no guarantee of receiving the money.

* Regional cooperation -- In Charlotte, N.C., and Mecklenburg County, the taxpayers voted for a half-percent sales-tax increase as part of the financing for the rail project.

The first phase will be 9 1/2 miles and will link the suburbs with downtown Charlotte. Charlotte has a central bus depot and a downtown streetcar that will all meet at the bus depot, as will other bus routes and the new light-rail line.

There will be 15 stations on the initial route, and the cost will be more than \$462 million. The balance of the funding (66 percent) is federal and state.

I would love to see this type of effort in the Richmond area, but I doubt it will happen -- our city/county form of government is different, and there doesn't seem to be a champion to promote such an ambitious system. Charlotte's system will be operational in 2007.

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So what can we do here ?

John Lewis, the CEO of GRTC, presented a plan that is somewhat of a hybrid but provides the best bang for the buck in the shortest time frame possible.

The term he used is Bus Rapid Transit. It would consist of hybrid buses that would be specially designed. They would have dedicated running ways, substantial stations, an efficient fare-collection system, limited-stop all-day service, strong identity and branding, and modern low-floor and high-capacity vehicles.

Note: A new GRTC maintenance facility is in the works, so there would be no duplication of effort.

The system would be flexible, and although the devil is in the details, I would say that if we linked Virginia Commonwealth University's two campuses (VCU's transportation requirements would help fund the fare box) as well as the various museums, Carytown, Shockoe Slip and Shockoe Bottom as far as Main Street Station, we would have a winning formula (partly funded by tourist fares).

If this can be converted at a later date to light rail that made sense, I would be for it. If it is still too expensive for rail, we can still expand or modify the Bus Rapid Transit routes, even to the suburbs. Where there is a will there is a way.

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From: "Nawdry" <nawdry@bga.com> (Lyndon Henry)
To: <LightRail_Now@yahoo.com>; <LightRailNow@yahoo.com>
Sent: Monday, December 04, 2006 10:28 PM
Subject: [LRPPro]

Here's the complete article [above] from the UR that Jonathan St. Thomas posted earlier.

This is one of the most stunning examples of codswallop I have seen in a while. There they hold a Light Rail Symposium in Richmond, and the local establishment ends up proposing ... "BRT"?

The litany of disinformation is breathtaking. To list a few items:

* It totally confuses larger, interurban-type LRT with streetcars.

* The notion that servicing underground utilities shuts down the streetcar or LRT line for "weeks" is simply some kind of absurd Old Wives' Tale.

* The writer totally confuses the impact of the original Eastside LRT line on Portland and the much more recent impact of the streetcar.

* As for cost ... if Little Rock and Kenosha (without dedicated funding sources) can afford to install streetcars, is Richmond really that financially strapped in comparison?

All in all, this seems to be an example of: If you have civic leaders that are easily bamboozled, and you're determined to oppose rail, you can find a way to derail it.

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Sent: Dec. 4, 2006

Brian:

I look forward to your columns, and fully expected to see one following the recent light rail symposium.

Perhaps I read your "Looking anew at streetcars" column in this morning's RTD too hastily, but it seems to me that you have too quickly dismissed light rail as not being feasible, nor desirable, for Richmond.

I am all too well acquainted with how difficult it is to get big things done in Richmond, but to me the overarching question is what do we want Richmond to become over the next half century? An "also-ran" town of little or no national significance, or a leader among cities of the southeast, which it used to be?

If we aspire to be in the big league, we had best start serious planning for light rail (I'm sure you read Neal Peirce's column in the last two Sunday editions of the RTD). Charlotte was not even a city of any note when Richmond was at its peak, in relative terms. Charlotte has obviously far surpassed Richmond in the last half century. Surely, Charlotte is not now counting on light rail simply to bring about an economic "revival"! There are many compelling reasons for a well-conceived light rail system in Richmond.

Bus rapid transit has a place in Richmond, and so does light rail.

The problem with Richmond, my hometown, is lack of consensus at the leadership level, not technical challenges associated with constructing light rail. Let's not make it easy on the people who should be leading us forward.

Again, I do enjoy your writing.

Dick Beadles.

[Founder: Virginians for High Speed Rail; acting Exec. Director: Va. Rail Policy Institute]