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The tale of two light rail forums

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Happy coincidence or scheduling sneak attack?

That's what some of us were wondering when we discovered dueling light-rail forums set to occur simultaneously Wednesday evening in Virginia Beach.

Two events dealing with the contentious and expensive subject of extending Norfolk's failing light rail into the Resort City were separated by just 5.3 miles and an ocean of enthusiasm.

If you wanted to attend both – as I did – you had to drive really fast and be resigned to missing chunks of at least one.

The forum that kicked off at 6 p.m. was hosted by Tidewater Community College, where President Edna V. Baehre-Kolovani recently cut a television commercial supporting light rail. The lightly attended event was held in the new student center at the Virginia Beach campus. I counted 47 in the room, including reporters. About 10 appeared to be the millennials the pro-light-rail crowd covets.

On Thursday, Michael Summers, provost of TCC's Norfolk campus, conceded that fewer than a dozen of the attendees appeared to be the students he'd hoped to attract.

“The kids go to class and go home,” he sighed. “They have other things going on in their lives, they work, they have mortgages.”

The forum that began an hour later was in the auditorium at the Meyera Oberndorf Central Library and hosted by light-rail opponent Councilman John Moss. That event drew at least 150. A few millennials, but mostly middle-aged voters.

Organizers of both claimed their forum was first on the calendar and implied that the rival symposium was strategically staged to drive down their attendance.

One thing's certain: Proponents of light rail stayed away from the library but put on a slick presentation full of lofty predictions and shiny promises at TCC.

It was a different scene and energy level at the library, where Dianna Howard, local Tea Party chairwoman and one of the organizers of the forum, said she'd tried since August to get a prominent light-rail supporter to present the other side of the argument.

Several initially expressed willingness to speak, Howard said, but backed out. On Wednesday afternoon, moderator Joel Rubin also decided not to come after learning that there would be nothing to moderate because light-rail proponents would be absent.

Cato Institute senior fellow Randal O'Toole, a nationally known light-rail opponent, did come, however. In fact, he also made a brief surprise visit to the TCC forum as the guest of the anti-light-rail representative, Reid Greenmun, who told me he surrendered his speaking time to the expert.

Without a live body to explain why light rail would be good for Virginia Beach at the library, the audience was shown a 32-minute HRT video extolling the wonders of light rail.

When it was his turn to speak to the friendly crowd, O'Toole dismantled many of the arguments used to justify light-rail projects. He pointed out that urban rail is successful when it's used as a commuter line, to take large numbers of workers to a downtown where there are hundreds of thousands of jobs

That's not Virginia Beach. Or Norfolk.

"They like to say you need light rail to get more riders who won't ride a bus," O'Toole pointed out. "Do you really want to subsidize snobs?"

Instead, O'Toole suggested an invigorated bus system, with frequent schedules and dedicated bus lanes. One way to get people on the buses, he joked, would be to paint the vehicles, equip them with Wi-Fi and call them "special buses."

With Game 7 of the World Series about to start, the library audience quickly dispersed after the Q&A, many grabbing "No Light Rail" yard signs on their way out.

No sooner had O'Toole left town than the City of Virginia Beach announced Thursday afternoon that a brand new forecast prepared by city staff predicts enormous benefits for the Beach if billions are spent to extend light rail throughout the region.

Imagine that.

Beach employees finished their sunny report just five days before the voters go to the polls to decide on light rail.

Just one more happy coincidence.