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## Take a Ride on the ‘Tide-tanic’: You’re Paying for It

*Virginia Beach taxpayers will vote on whether to fund an extension of a light-rail line that no one rides.*

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The clang—*bling bling!*—is familiar to anyone who lives along the edge of downtown, an otherwise pleasant part of this old Navy port town. The bell signals an arriving train on the Tide, a 7.4-mile light-rail line. Here’s something else you will notice if you hop aboard: The train is seldom carrying more than six passengers. The Tide moves from places you don’t work to areas you don’t wish to visit. It doesn’t stop at the airport or the world’s largest naval base.

But residents of nearby Virginia Beach will vote on Nov. 8 whether to use local tax dollars to extend the Tide to their shores. Proponents promise strong ridership, economic development, sustainable travel, even slimmer waist lines—commuting on light rail, one group says, reduces your odds of obesity by a precise 81%. If that claim sounds laughable, the rest are equally bogus. Virginia Beach taxpayers are actually considering a bailout for one of the least patronized rail systems in the country.

The Tide first picked up passengers in 2011, more than a year later than scheduled and \$100 million over budget. A federal transportation grant and stimulus money funded the project, and by the end transit officials were under investigation for fudging cost estimates. A Federal Transit Administration profile predicted 10,400 weekday riders in the Tide’s opening year. The train doesn’t crack half that, even now.

The Brookings Institution last year bestowed on the Tide the dishonor of losing more money per ride—\$6.63—than any other metro rail system in the U.S. Lamentably, the light rail in Santa Clara, Calif., sneaked past the Tide to steal the title of Biggest Loser before this tidbit could appear in Norfolk tourism brochures. But the race is still competitive. Tide fares contribute about 15% of operating expenses; the 2014 shortfall was \$9.5 million.

The pitch for light rail is always the same: Businesses will pop up along the route, which is good for the economy; plus, millennials *love* riding trains. A city fact sheet suggests the Tide and other transit projects have spurred \$600 million in development. But the methodology seems to count everything built since the rail opened, regardless of the train’s role. For instance, did light-rail riders demand a new \$70 million medical office? As for millennials, their already dismal ridership is expected to decline. Young people grow older and do the unthinkable: Buy cars.

The Tide clogs roads, as drivers idle at intersections waiting for a train to pass. Another irony: “Because the light-rail cars are so empty,” the Cato Institute’s Randal O’Toole says, “they use a

huge amount of energy per passenger mile”—nearly 7,200 British thermal units, or BTUs, in 2014 compared with 3,600 for the average SUV. Wonderful news for Norfolk’s Chevy Suburban drivers, who can buzz by the train with the smug superiority once reserved for people who bike to work.

Tide advocates aren’t fazed by any of this. Two years ago the economists at the opinion page of the *Virginian-Pilot* newspaper suggested slashing fares to 50 cents from \$1.50, or maybe even making rides free. “It’s time to end the pretense,” the editorialists wrote, “that a 7-mile starter light rail line can on its own attract enough fare-paying riders to substantially offset the cost of operations.” For intellectual firepower the paper cited an article on mass transit published by Salon.com.

The idea to cut fares went nowhere, but Virginia Beach has debated for years whether the Tide deserves a cash infusion in the form of a 3.5-mile extension. The state would put up \$155 million, but Virginia Beach taxpayers would be stuck with the rest—at least \$88 million, not including inevitable cost overruns.

Proponents of the measure are largely the folks who would profit: railway developers. The No Light Rail in Virginia Beach campaign is run by the city’s treasurer, John Atkinson, along with a handful of Virginia Beach council members and activists. Acrimony between the two sides is running high. The light-rail crowd accuses detractors of the ultimate sin in 2016: Coarsening the “public discourse” with phrases like “lie rail” and “Tide-tanic.” Earlier this month opponents put up a sand sculpture at a beach festival—and someone raked off the three-dimensional letters telling residents to vote against.

The no campaign has the better argument. Extending the Tide would siphon tax dollars from bus services, schools or preparation for the occasional hurricane that submerges the place. But the vote could be close: An October survey showed the ballot measure polling dead even, with 48% in support and 49% opposed.

One sign of desperation is that rail proponents don’t even purport to discuss benefits. Instead they rely on bromides about posterity. Virginia Beach should be a place “where young people are valued and take part in building a 21st century community,” one activist wrote in a newspaper op-ed. “This includes making light rail part of our story.” Allow me to preview how this story ends: Empty trains to nowhere that barrel around town every 10 to 15 minutes. *Bling bling!*