

The Virginian-Pilot

Roger Chesley: Residents should hear both sides of light rail

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Our regional transit agency organized a light-rail forum this week, and experts from around the country flocked to Virginia Beach to relay success stories. Folks from Denver, Phoenix, Charlotte, N.C., and elsewhere stopped by, and among the published objectives was to “positively influence attitudes of unconvinced or uncommitted stakeholders.”

Great! Local residents and decision-makers should indeed learn how the proposed extension of The Tide to Town Center could be “transformational,” and how light rail can contribute to “economically vibrant cities/regions,” to quote a few buzzwords from Monday’s program. Partners and sponsors included Virginia Beach Vision, the Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization and Rail~Volution, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit that bills itself as building “livable communities with transit.”

So, will Hampton Roads Transit host a similar conference inviting cities where light rail failed miserably, or where leaders and residents rejected it outright, so the people of Virginia Beach can get a panoramic view?

“No,” replied Tom Holden, a HRT spokesman. “We’re in the business of promoting transit.”

OK, OK, I knew I was needling my former Virginian-Pilot colleague. But I wasn’t being *totally* facetious.

As you probably know, Virginia Beach will hold a nonbinding referendum in November on light rail. Voters overwhelmingly supported a similar one in 2012.

I believe Virginia Beach City Council members have enough information to decide whether to approve an extension from Norfolk. But since Beach residents got the issue on the ballot this fall, so be it.

One key detail should come out soon: The current estimate is \$327 million to bring The Tide 3.2 miles to Town Center, but that’s based on a 5 percent design. Holden said that by September, HRT should have new estimates based on a 30 percent design. It will have more precise figures for issues including utility realignment, cost of materials and the location of stations.

Shouldn't folks in our region also learn about, say, what happened in Austin, Texas? The city of 926,000 – about twice the size of Virginia Beach – in 2014 rejected a light-rail proposal for central Austin. They did that, even though the local newspaper says the area has “crushing and ever-worsening traffic.”

Voters shot down the plan 57-43 percent. Bryce Bencivengo, a city of Austin spokesman, told me Wednesday that the \$1.4 billion price tag and the line's location were two major factors in the defeat. Many voters were concerned about the lack of population density on the proposed route, he said.

Randal O'Toole, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, is a harsh critic of light rail, and in 2014 spoke to similar skeptics in the Beach. O'Toole told me Tuesday that several cities, including Buffalo, N.Y., have had lousy track records with it.

“The question about light rail,” O'Toole said, “is why anybody builds it at all.” He questioned the expense, how the tracks disrupt street traffic and the lack of capacity.

“The benefits are far lower, and the costs are far higher, than what's claimed,” he added.

Where's the opportunity, locally, to hear a global view from naysayers?

Julie Hill, spokeswoman for the city of Virginia Beach, told me officials are limited in what they can do by city and state codes because of the upcoming referendum. Localities can issue “neutral materials,” for example – though I bet Beach residents may quarrel over the meaning. The city has [a light-rail section on its website](#).

Here's my point: Proponents shouldn't fear stories of failure. Nor should opponents fear stories of success.

It's easy to get the latter. How about doing the same for the former?