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Streetcar plan remains a dividing line in N.Va.

By Patricia Sullivan

Arlington native James Page remembers the streetcars in the 1950s and 1960s and all the problems they created when they broke down.

It's been hard to forget as he's viewed the latest videos from the Columbia Pike Transit Initiative, examined their illustrated posters, talked to the business-suited transportation experts and listened to an hour's worth of presentations on why a \$250 million streetcar line would be good for the quickly gentrifying commercial and residential corridor. He's come away with a firm opinion. "My perspective is it's a waste of money," he said.

Arlington County Board member Chris Zimmerman said Page and others who share his perspective are mired in outdated memories and are thinking too narrowly.

"People are remembering old systems that had been built in the teens and '20s and neglected for decades," Zimmerman said. "Part of this is ensuring the long-term fiscal viability of our county. It's an investment that has a return."

When he and other officials from Arlington and Fairfax counties talk about the decade-old plans to run a streetcar from the Skyline area of Baileys Crossroads in Fairfax northeast along Columbia Pike to the Pentagon City Metro station, they are not talking about mere transportation.

They are trying to put into place a vision that would turn the traffic-clogged, sun-blasted camino of concrete into a tree-lined boulevard fronted by a diverse set of businesses. They also want to entice new businesses that will cater to the 7,000-plus new residents expected to move into 3,900 new apartments over the next 30 years.

They are talking about preserving affordable housing amid growing development pressures and expanding the counties' tax bases. Last but not least, they want to change societal behavior by coaxing residents and commuters out of their cars and into public transit. Ultimately, Arlington wants a Columbia Pike streetcar line to connect to its planned streetcar line down the U.S. 1 corridor, where it might connect to public transit in Alexandria. Fairfax residents for years have harbored hopes of a streetcar along Leesburg Pike, and a Columbia Pike streetcar with a terminus at the Skyline mall would be a place to start.

The Arlington County Board and the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors will vote on a staff recommendation in July to reaffirm their 2006 support to build the Columbia Pike streetcar line or to opt for other choices, including the use of longer, articulated buses. Those buses, which are in use on some District routes, can carry almost as

many passengers as a streetcar and would cost far less initially, an estimated \$50 million.

Project's funding

Elected officials have to vote again because they are seeking \$75 million in funds from the Federal Transit Administration, which requires proof that local governments considered alternatives.

Virginia is expected to provide \$35 million from its transportation budget, and a tax on local commercial property owners would cover the remaining \$140 million in capital costs. Because most of the project is in Arlington, the taxpayers there would cover 80 percent of the \$140 million. Operating costs would come out of the counties' general funds, which is another way of saying that all property owners, including homeowners, would share those costs.

Streetcar opponents have been pushing the articulated-bus option because it is cheaper, is faster to implement and can run on natural gas or other non-diesel fuels, they say.

Because there is no room for another lane of traffic, the streetcar tracks would run in the curb lane, where bicyclists could get their tires caught and where cars and buses could get stuck behind them, opponents say.

Arlington's Transit Advisory Committee two weeks ago came within a single vote of recommending articulated buses and opposing streetcars. Opponents are also circulating a critique of the national streetcar trend by Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian **Cato Institute**. What opponents are overlooking, streetcar supporters say, is that the number of people who will take a bus on Columbia Pike is hitting its peak. Buses now carry about 16,000 riders a day along Columbia Pike, making it the most heavily used bus corridor in Virginia. The buses come every two or three minutes, but they are often jammed with passengers and they often bunch up, especially when traffic is heavy, as it is during the morning and evening rush hours.

Moreover, according a Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments survey and a follow-up survey paid for by Arlington, 60 percent of residents in the area say they never take the bus and prefer to drive. That figure alarms transportation officials.

"If 60 percent of the new residents we're planning to bring into this corridor drive personal vehicles, we've got a serious problem," said Steve Del Giudice, Arlington's transit bureau chief. When those drivers were asked if they would try using a streetcar, 60 percent of them said yes, Del Giudice said.

While buses would continue to run, some of the benefits of buses stem from the assumption that riders will pay before they board the bus and that there will be multiple doors used for boarding, Del Giudice said. Unless the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, which runs the bus system, agrees to change its policy and allow remote fare collection, an articulated bus will not move any faster through traffic than existing buses do, he said.

Besides, "why would people who are not attracted to ride on a bus be willing to ride on a bigger bus?" Zimmerman asked.

No guarantees

Development is already happening along Columbia Pike, and in the next three decades planners expect 2.2 million additional square feet of commercial development and 7,000 new jobs. At either end of the dumbbell-shaped streetcar line lie two major employment centers. Arlington has already replaced major utilities beneath the pike, new streetlights are being installed, several new multi-use developments have opened or are underway, and portions of the route have wider sidewalks that give a hint of what planners envision.

But nothing is guaranteed. A 2002 transit referendum measure that would have dedicated a half-cent tax for transportation failed. A 2008 Virginia Supreme Court decision barred Northern Virginia from imposing taxes for road and transit projects. And opponents, such as Page, the Arlington native and retiree who lives in the same house his grandfather bought in 1938, remain unconvinced. More than 300 comments flooded into the government in the past month, and although they were not sorted and analyzed to indicate how many were for each alternative, many were vociferous in their opinions. (Read them at wapo.st/streetcarplan). Zimmerman said he is sure that the majority of Arlingtonians agree that it's time to move forward on Columbia Pike.

"If the 2002 referendum had passed, we'd be riding [a streetcar] now," Zimmerman said. "If we didn't have that court decision, we'd be building it now. . . . We've put a lot of money into the public infrastructure, and we're already seeing changes. But there's a long way to go."