

The Virginian-Pilot

Now arriving at this conclusion: Light rail is all about development

Kerry Dougherty | Sep 14, 2014

At last. A bright side to light rail.

Norfolk's Tide is a disappointment. Ridership is falling, and passengers seem willing to climb on board only if taxpayers hand them free – or nearly free – seats. Worse, we learned last week that extending the route just 3 miles to Virginia Beach's chain-restaurant-rich Town Center – let's just call this little link The Cheesecake Express – would cost an estimated \$327 million.

More than \$100 million a mile.

But wait. I promised good news, and here it is: After years of deception, light rail's disciples are finally admitting that the project isn't about moving people on trains.

Light rail is not about transportation. It's not about the environment. And it's not about unclogging bottlenecked roads.

It never was.

Light rail in Hampton Roads is primarily about one thing: Development.

Even The Pilot's editorial board acknowledges this. In a recent piece urging that The Tide's modest \$1.50 fare be slashed to entice freeloaders – and, coincidentally, to inflate passenger numbers – the paper's opinion writers conceded that the trains are part of a grand plan to “celebrate urban life.”

“The Tide's purpose always has been to drive development and redevelopment near its stations,” declared the editorial. “Light rail can provide an alternative to commuting for some people, but urban vitality has always been the purpose for its existence and the enormous cost.”

In other words, light rail is a social engineer's dream wrapped in a feel-good fiction of mass transit.

But this proves that devotees of the new urbanism – who want to herd suburbanites into high-density ant colonies – are trying to grab transportation funds to make conditions ripe for their concrete utopias.

It's sleight of hand. And it's wrong.

In an op-ed piece published last week in AltDaily headlined "Rail Transit Makes No Sense for the Hampton Roads Region," the Cato Institute's Randal O'Toole declared The Tide "a dismal failure" and decried this use of transportation dollars to spur development. He pointed out that "transit-oriented development ... is not that popular with most people. That means developers won't build it unless it's subsidized."

Developers' dreams should not be subsidized with precious transportation funds.

Oh, and O'Toole correctly pointed out that, to be successful, light rail must be about "bringing large numbers of people into major job centers."

Problem is, jobs in Hampton Roads are spread throughout our sprawling region. This isn't the Washington, D.C., metropolitan jobs-rich area, or even Atlanta or Charlotte.

Sadly, expanding the line into Virginia Beach wouldn't make The Tide successful from a people-moving perspective.

In a presentation to the Beach City Council last week, HRT officials projected that the 3-mile-long Cheesecake extension would have a weekday "ridership" of 2,250 over the next 20 years.

Remember, those are rides, not passengers. Assuming that most passengers travel round-trip, that means the line will serve about 1,125 people a day.

Sad.

So taxpayers will dump \$327 million into bringing the line to the Beach and will be chagrined when traffic congestion is not relieved. In fact, depending on station location, light rail may make life worse for some commuters.

But the developers and their lapdogs on city councils don't care about that. Nor do they care how much the project costs taxpayers.

They know – and now everyone knows – that light rail isn't about traffic or moving people around town. It's about high-density complexes springing up around quaint, lightly used train stations in some sad suburban attempt to replicate authentic city life.