

Light rail or "lie rail"? Foe tears into Tide at Beach talk

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Transportation analyst Randal O'Toole has another name for light rail.

It should be called lie rail, he said, "because everything they tell you about it is a lie."

O'Toole, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, discussed his findings on the matter Thursday night in a talk called "Light Rail: The Truth You Never Hear About."

About 50 people showed up at the Meyera E. Oberndorf Central Library for the event, which was hosted by the Virginia Beach Taxpayer Alliance against a backdrop of signs, including, "How do you spell high taxes? Blight Rail."

O'Toole tailored his presentation to The Tide, Norfolk's 7.4-mile line that opened in 2011, and the plans by city leaders in Virginia Beach to extend it there.

He poked holes in the notion that Norfolk has the job density to support a robust light-rail line, noted that only 2.7 percent of workers in the area live in a household without a car, and said Hampton Roads buses are already "some of the emptiest in America."

Hampton Roads Transit officials were not in attendance. Tom Holden, a spokesman for the agency, said before the event that "Mr. O'Toole is a fierce critic of light-rail transit, and he marshals every scrap of information he can to shoot it down."

O'Toole carried plenty of bullets Thursday evening. Lie No. 3 in his presentation was titled, "It will 'only' cost \$327 million."

That is the estimated cost of extending The Tide from Newtown Road in Norfolk to Town Center, an option that is under study and favored by several City Council members. They could formally endorse the route by early next year. The state has offered to pay 50 percent of a Beach light-rail extension, up to \$155 million.

O'Toole said the cost of light-rail projects typically exceeds projections by 40 percent.

Lie No. 4: Light rail attracts new riders.

The Norfolk line carried 135,924 riders in August, according to HRT statistics. That's an average of about 4,400 per day.

O'Toole showed a photo of an empty Tide car. Norfolk has some of the lowest occupancy rates in the country, he said.

He also showed graphs to counter pro-transit arguments that light rail will reduce congestion and save energy. The Tide's low ridership means light rail expends more energy per passenger mile than people driving SUVs or taking the bus, he said. He pointed to other cities where the introduction of light rail made congestion worse for drivers because of the additional signals they must wait for when trains pass.

But Lie No. 7 was "the really big lie," the one council members are salivating over, O'Toole said. That was the one about light rail stimulating development.

Again, O'Toole pointed to other cities, such as Portland, Ore., where development never materialized as planners had hoped and instead the city had to dump hundreds of millions in subsidies to spur projects.

So, audience member Den Black asked, "How do you stop this nonsense?"

O'Toole said Beach residents need to elect council members who oppose an extension. They can also send Republicans to Congress and hope they end what he called the "bucket of money" given by the federal government to cities to fund light-rail projects.

Toward the end of his presentation, O'Toole gave yet another reason why light rail is a bad idea: the self-driving car. Fully automated vehicles like the one Google has developed will be on the market by 2020, he predicted. They will dramatically reduce congestion and probably greatly reduce fatalities, he said.

When those cars are everywhere, there will be no need for mass transit anywhere in the country, except for five cities with heavily dense centers, he said.