

Officials: Bus rapid transit could spur development in Richmond

'Very cost-effective' system could spur economic development, say officials at Urban Land Institute program

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BY PETER BACQUÉ Richmond Times-Dispatch

Bus rapid transit can provide metro Richmond with service comparable to a light-rail system at a fraction of the cost, officials said at an Urban Land Institute Richmond program Wednesday.

"It's a very cost-effective way to have a premium transit service," said Amy M. Inman with the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation.

Such a system could improve the capital region's fundamental transportation system and stimulate economic development.

Bus rapid transit, or BRT, is an enhanced form of a bus system that operates on special bus lanes and combines the flexibility of buses with the efficiency of rail, the Federal Transit Administration said.

As conceived by GRTC Transit System and the state agency, a bus rapid transit system running in the Broad Street corridor from the Shops at Willow Lawn to Rocketts Landing would cost \$53.8 million to build and equip, and about \$2.7 million a year to run.

Opened in 2011, The Tide light-rail system in Norfolk has engendered more than half a billion dollars in transit-oriented development along its 7.4-mile line, Julie Timm with Hampton Roads Transit said at the Urban Land Institute program, held at Willow Oaks Country Club in South Richmond.

"It catalyzes economic development in a way other transit doesn't," Timm said.

Running from the city's downtown to the Virginia Beach line, The Tide is attracting more than 5,000 riders on weekdays.

"These projects aren't cheap," Inman said. The Tide cost \$318 million to build, Timm said.

Cleveland launched what has become an award-winning bus rapid transit system on Euclid Avenue in 2008.

The \$197.2 million project is made up of a 7.1-mile bus rapid transit facility and 2.3 miles of bus-oriented street improvements in a “transit zone” in downtown Cleveland, according to the Federal Transit Administration. It operates as the HealthLine after the Cleveland Clinic and University Hospitals, two major health care institutions in the Euclid corridor, bought the naming rights.

Since it opened, Cleveland’s bus rapid transit system has generated more than \$5 billion in development, according to the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority.

“We can see that here,” Inman said. “BRT’s perceived permanence is critical to establish faith” that the service will operate as promised.

“Infrastructure is key to economic development,” concurred Andrew Terry with the RVA Rapid Transit advocacy group. “The developer knows this is going to be there. Employees know this is going to be there. Businesses know it’s going to be there.”

The capital region’s bus rapid transit project needs official backing from the Richmond and Henrico County governing bodies, said David Green, CEO of GRTC. “We’re ready to go.”

The bus rapid transit system would run every 10 minutes during peak times and every 15 minutes off-peak, Inman said.

Such a system also employs more advanced technologies and infrastructure — such as signal timing coordination and median-running bus lanes — than traditional transit bus systems. As a result, the Federal Transit Administration said, bus rapid transit can operate at faster speeds, provide greater service reliability and increased customer convenience.

“We’re still getting a good level of service,” Inman said. “It’s just on rubber tires.”

Officials project a Richmond bus rapid transit system would carry about 3,300 passengers a day, while other buses carrying thousands more riders also could take advantage of the system’s dedicated bus lanes.

Also with stops at Main Street Station and 25th Street, the proposed bus rapid transit system would mesh with the city’s contemplated Shockoe Bottom stadium development, Inman said.

The Richmond region could see bus rapid transit rolling by the end of 2017, Inman said. Funds for the project would come from federal, state and local coffers, and require approvals at those levels.

The Urban Land Institute is an independent nonprofit organization supported by members representing real estate development and land-use disciplines.