

February 16, 2009

Letter to the Editor:

The City of Norfolk and its City Council have taken a leadership role for our region by boldly moving forward with a light rail starter line. It is now time for Virginia Beach to get on board. Light rail must be an integral and comprehensive part of the entire region's transportation future, and the next logical step will be to extend this line through the heart of Virginia Beach to the oceanfront.

Virginia Beach's Strategic Growth Areas planning process is creating a new vision for development that will change the nature of these areas to a more urban, mixed-use lifestyle. The new model embraces higher density development that will be dependent on a transportation network that features pedestrian friendly corridors and easily accessible public transit. The existing Norfolk Southern rail corridor runs through both the Pembroke/Town Center area and the Resort Development area. Along its path, the LRT would access major destination areas such as Witchduck, Town Center, Rosemont, Lynnhaven, Oceana, the Convention Center and the new entertainment center being planned on the former Dome site.

At a time when the nation's attention is focused on providing economic stimulus, a LRT in Hampton Roads offers just that. Other cities have seen a renaissance around their light rail stations. In Norfolk, there is already \$500 million in new development planned near light rail stops. Not all of it is directly tied to light rail, but the transit line is a major factor in nearly every plan. In Charlotte, the LYNX light rail has spurred new mixed-use, transit-oriented development, resulting in increased property values, business growth and alternative lifestyle options.

Nationwide studies by the Urban Land Institute found that properties within a quarter-mile of a light rail station increase in value by up to 25 percent. One only need look at Arlington and other Northern Virginia jurisdictions to see the transitional impact of the Metro system there.

The Strategic Growth Areas focus on higher density developments that will allow retail, commercial and residential uses in more compact geographical areas. These areas will provide for a less auto dependent lifestyle where citizens will live, work and shop within easy walking distance. The transition to more compact business centers will shift the city's tax base away from its dependence on residential real estate taxes to one supported by expanded business related taxes, realizing a long term goal of City Council and the City's taxpayers.

Critics of light rail transit tend to stress the cost of constructing and operating the system, pointing fingers at the inability of rider fees to cover costs. It is true; there isn't any transit system in the world that is self supporting and The Tide will be no exception. What seems to be forgotten in this argument is that the roads on which we travel daily are also heavily subsidized by the taxpayer. It costs far more to build a one-mile lane of highway than it does to build a mile for an LRT. Because the ridership capacity of LRT can be increased by simply adding rail cars,

it can move as many people as four to six lanes of additional highway capacity at significantly less cost and with far less impact on the environment.

Beyond its economic impact, the transit system will also help address growing societal needs in our region. The demand for senior-friendly transportation alternatives will expand as the baby boomer generation ages. Even after the line has been extended through Virginia Beach to the Oceanfront and as highway congestion increases, the system should grow to include other major destinations such as the airport, Old Dominion University, Norfolk Naval Base, and similar destinations in Chesapeake and Portsmouth. Military men and women, students, employees and visitors will all find The Tide a convenient alternative to congested roadways.

The Virginia Beach City Council should be complimented for seeking acquisition of the Norfolk Southern right-of-way and for pursuing an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) of the costs and benefits associated with extending light rail to the oceanfront. Our City and region have become more urban, and we must pursue transportation systems that recognize this reality. Only upon completion of the EIS will we have the details to make a truly informed decision on the opportunity to bring LRT to Virginia Beach, but based on the experiences of other regions around the country, we have every reason to believe that LRT presents an exciting opportunity.

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Virginia Beach Vision, Inc. is a non-profit, non-partisan, issue-oriented group that provides private sector leadership to create a vision and to advance initiatives necessary to the City of Virginia Beach and the Hampton Roads region's future development, prosperity and quality of life.