

## Norfolk credits light rail with downtown development

By Dave Forster  
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### NORFOLK

In the public debate over bringing light rail to Virginia Beach, a primary point of contention is how extending The Tide to Town Center or farther will or won't shape and spur economic development.

Residents need only look to Norfolk to see how quickly multimillion-dollar projects can pile up thanks to a rail line - and just how subjective and squishy such lists can be.

A two-page handout maintained by Norfolk's Department of Development lists 25 projects totaling more than \$600 million that have been built or are in the works, all under the banner of "Downtown Norfolk Transit Oriented Development."

The items include \$24 million in renovations and additions at the Chrysler Museum of Art, the new Slover Library, the courts complex and the planned overhaul of Waterside. A future expansion of the federal courthouse on Granby Street is listed as well, as is a hotel and conference center project to which the city is contributing more than \$100 million.

James Koch, an economist at Old Dominion University who co-authors the school's annual State of the Region report, said there's a trend nationally "and probably locally" to attribute much more economic development to light rail or other transit routes despite a lack of hard evidence to support the claims.

"They're simply assertions," he said.

Koch mentioned the development around Eastern Virginia Medical School, which includes a \$70 million medical office building and a \$16 million apartment building, also on the city's list.

"It's not clear to me that any of those things wouldn't have happened anyway," he said.

Transit-oriented development doesn't necessarily mean it caused a project to happen. Norfolk Planning Director George Homewood said the classic definition of the phrase is development that happens around a transit station that makes it easier for people to work and live without a vehicle.

Transit-induced development is the term for projects that are built bigger or better, or that might have gone elsewhere, if not for that transit line, Homewood said.

The city does not keep a list of transit-induced development, but Homewood said light rail "turned the market" in downtown and helped spur the conversion of several buildings into living quarters. The city handout includes four such conversion projects there, as well as Metro on Granby, which encompasses two new \$12 million apartment buildings, according to the document.

"The light rail has made downtown sexy and hot," Homewood said.

Koch said he does not discount the potential for a transit line to spur development. However, he said, "the evidence is pretty clear" nationally that not a whole lot of that happens unless it's in an area where there's already a concentrated population and some momentum is already afoot for transit to accelerate.

Koch also pointed out light-rail stations east of downtown - Harbor Park, Norfolk State University and Newtown Road - where he said he has seen little to no evidence of new development.

The city will be doing more to attract development at its Military Highway Station. Norfolk received a \$120,000 grant from the state to create a transit-oriented development plan in that area and hopes to have that done by the end of 2016, Homewood said. The plan will include market, design and transportation infrastructure studies, he said.

The most curious inclusion in the city handout on transit-oriented development is the new Midtown Tunnel project. City spokeswoman Lori Crouch said it might have been added because of its location in a so-called "light rail supportive area" as defined by the commissioner of revenue.

Inclusion of the tunnel project on a list of transit-oriented developments carries some irony because of the decision years ago to not include space in the tunnel for a dedicated transit line, such as light rail. Homewood, who did not help create the city handout, said the tunnel was "not the sort of thing" he would have listed, calling the decision to not incorporate a transit tube in the tunnel "one of the huge missed opportunities that's going to haunt us for decades to come."

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