

Study of extending light rail to naval station begins

NORFOLK

A \$1.8 million study of extending light rail to Norfolk Naval Station has begun.

Hampton Roads Transit announced Wednesday that it had told HDR Engineering Inc. to begin identifying potential routes for getting The Tide or another form of high-capacity mass transit to the base, a major source of congestion with some 80,000 vehicles coming and going daily.

The study, expected to take 15 months, is the first step in a yearslong process to pursue federal funding for an extension, said Tom Holden, a spokesman for Hampton Roads Transit.

The City Council passed a resolution in October asking the transit agency for the study. It is being paid for with federal and state money, Holden said.

The research will involve asking the public to help identify possible corridors for connecting Norfolk's \$318 million, 7.4-mile light-rail line to the Navy base, gathering concerns and gauging the need.

Julie Timm, transit development officer for HRT, said the researchers have no preconceived notions about what path a line to the base should follow. There will be many public meetings to collect opinions, she said.

Norfolk council members have been waiting for such a study since The Tide opened in the fall of 2011.

"It's time to move on," Councilman Barclay C. Winn said. "Phase one is in place now, and it was never intended to be the end. It was intended to be the beginning."

Mayor Paul Fraim said the study will help identify obstacles and what the cost of an extension would be. He said he is confident the research will support the need for light rail, not extended bus service, to the base.

Capt. David Culler, commanding officer of Norfolk Naval Station, said before the council requested the study in October that efficient transportation is a critical readiness issue and that the Navy is interested in reducing congestion for its commuters. He did not explicitly say then that light rail should be part of the solution.

Expanding light rail was the most common suggestion in a recent transportation survey of active-duty personnel, civilian staff and military contractors. It accounted for 20 percent of the 3,713 comments and suggestions that the Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization collected in a survey that drew nearly 11,000 participants between late 2011 and early 2012 from military installations across the region.

Old Dominion University, located between Norfolk's existing light-rail line and Norfolk Naval Station, figures to play a significant role in discussions of where an extension might run. Jennifer Mullen, assistant

vice president of marketing and communications at ODU, released a short statement by email.

"We would welcome any study that could possibly lead to light rail coming to Old Dominion and benefitting our students, faculty and staff," it said.

Virginia Beach city staff members are reviewing an unsolicited proposal by a development group to extend light rail there from Newtown Road to near Rosemont Road under a public-private partnership.

Pilot writer Jillian Nolin contributed to this report.

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Source URL (retrieved on 04/12/2013 - 13:39): <http://hamptonroads.com/2013/04/study-extending-light-rail-naval-station-begins>