

Peninsula hearings to focus on rail plan

A decision on the future of public transportation in the area could come this summer.

BY KIMBALL PAYNE

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NEWPORT NEWS - Hampton Roads Transit will hold two public hearings on the Peninsula next week to gather input on the proposed light rail project that is rapidly losing momentum.

Michael Townes, the president and CEO of the transit agency, told the Commonwealth Transportation Board last week that the projected ridership numbers in the area are not high enough to justify light rail. However, Hampton Roads Transit still wants Peninsula residents to weigh in on the options.

"Just because one solution might not be viable, that doesn't mean the problem has gone away," Townes said. "We don't want to make the decision without hearing from all the stakeholders."

The agency has been seeking federal funding for the project, but Townes said the light rail numbers just weren't adding up. Federal officials weigh a number of factors including the number of riders, the cost of the project, and the potential for economic development.

"Light rail just isn't there yet," Townes said.

If light rail falls through, there are a number of alternatives including a commuter rail or a rail system that uses historic streetcars. Both of options would run along fixed tracks, so the engineering and economic studies done on light rail in Hampton and Newport News could still be used.

The agency also will consider expanding bus service or creating a bus rapid transit system, which gives larger than normal buses their own lane to increase efficiency.

The first meeting will be held in Hampton on Tuesday, the second in Newport News on Thursday. Agency officials will explain environmental and engineering studies on the various types of transit.

In addition to the public meetings, transit officials will hear reports from consultants on which project best suits the region before conferring with local governments.

Townes said the transit agency would meet with governments in June and early July before making a decision later in the summer on the direction of the area's mass transit system.

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