

*Standing Committee on Light Rail Transit (AP075)*  
*Graham Currie, Chair*

## **The Virtues of Light Rail Transit in Urban Transportation**

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Perhaps no public transit-related committee in the TRB family has generated more enthusiasm and activity than its Light Rail Committee.

Since its inception as a subcommittee under the Rail Transit Systems Committee, its evolution can be tracked by the growing interest in light rail transit spawned by developments of modern systems in Western Europe and promoted by transit professionals who had the vision of its application for cities in North America. Indeed, spirited by the dominance of light rail topics in meeting agendas, and following several successful light rail-specific conferences, the subcommittee gained full committee status in 1993.

Perhaps the watershed moment for the light rail renaissance in North America, and for this committee, was the first conference on light rail transit in 1975. This was jointly sponsored by TRB, the then Urban Mass Transit Administration (UMTA), and the University of Pennsylvania. There are several notable quotes in the proceedings of that conference that aptly described the state of the rail industry at the time. Robert E. Patricelli, the UMTA Administrator at the time, wrote, “It was felt that a special effort was needed to expose decision makers, planners, engineers, operators, and other interested individuals to the many virtues of light rail transit.” Stewart F. Taylor of Sanders and Thomas, Inc., added, “The objective ... has been to put forward the basic characteristics of light rail transit and the techniques of applying it to improve transportation and the quality of urban life. ... The Conference Committee hopes that this conference will contribute to a wider understanding of light rail transit. If that is achieved, the future course of urban transportation will be determined on a sounder basis.” Perhaps Frank C. Herringer of UMTA summed up the timing of this event best when he wrote, “Had the conference on light rail transit been held ten or even five years ago, those in attendance would have been viewed as little more than eccentrics or nostalgia buffs infatuated with a dying mode of transportation. Much has changed in all of mass transit in recent years, but few events have been as dramatic as the reawakening of interest in LRT.”

While there were several light rail projects in the pipeline at the time, this conference helped to create a clear focus on what light rail was all about and how it could be beneficially applied in our communities.

And the energy and level of activity has not abated. In addition to being the most active and prolific group in TRB’s Rail Transit committee structure in paper sessions at annual conferences, the light rail conference has been repeated thirteen times since that first meeting in 1975, adapting to the issues of the day and the growing application of light rail and streetcar systems in North American cities; specifically:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Conference Title</b>
1977	Boston	Light Rail Transit: Planning and Technology
1982	San Diego	Light Rail Transit: Planning, Design and Implementation
1985	Pittsburgh	Light Rail Transit: System Design for Cost Effectiveness
1988	San Jose	Light Rail Transit: New System Successes at Affordable Prices
1992	Calgary	Light Rail Transit: Planning, Design and Operating Experience
1995	Baltimore	Building on Success – Learning from Experience
2000	Dallas	Light Rail: Investment for the Future
2003	Portland	Light Rail: Experience, Economics and Evolution
2006	St. Louis	Light Rail: A World of Applications and Opportunities
2009	Los Angeles	Light Rail: Growth and Renewal
2012	Salt Lake City	Sustaining the Metropolis: LRT & Streetcars for Super Cities
2015	Minneapolis	Transforming Urban Areas
2019	Jersey City	Resurgence and Renewal

(Since 2012, the conferences have been jointly sponsored with the American Public Transportation Association [APTA].)

These conferences also parallel the light rail success story in North America. Led by the opening of the first modern light rail system in Edmonton in 1978, today there are 24 new light rail systems totaling about 800 route-miles (1,300 route-kms) and 19 new streetcar circulator systems, with more new starts and extensions on the way.

Currently, in addition to routine business, the TRB Light Rail Committee includes three subcommittees that are focused on Streetcars, International LRT Developments, and Conference Planning, respectively. The Committee is also active with several other TRB subcommittees in matters of mutual interest, such as the Guided and Electric Buses, Transit State of Good Repair, and Shared Rail Corridors and Facilities.

The future continues to look bright for the continuation of the light rail and streetcar renaissance in North America, and the Committee’s important role in it.

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