

# Overview of Recent Light Rail Transit Activity

## C. KENNETH ORSKI, Corporation for Urban Mobility

It is indeed a pleasure for me to speak on behalf of the Transportation Research Board, for TRB has been intimately linked with the efforts to reawaken interest in light rail transit in postwar America. It was to TRB that UMTA turned, back in early 1975, with its request to organize a "consciousness-raising" national conference on light rail transit. The Philadelphia meeting, held in June 1975, attracted nearly 700 people and generated a level of interest that exceeded all expectations. The New York Times headlined the story, Trolley Staging a Comeback Over the Nation. Time Magazine, Newsweek, The Wall Street Journal, and a host of other news media treated the conference as a major news event. It has been almost 7 years since that landmark conference, but many of the participants at that meeting are still active in light rail transit and are with us today.

At the Philadelphia conference the keynote speaker was the UMTA Administrator and he expressed the federal government's position regarding light rail transit:

We feel that light rail transit is a viable alternative to other modes of transportation. . . . We do not favor light rail over other modes. We are merely saying that it should be considered as an alternative when a city is making the choice as to what kind of a transit system it should have.

This position was meant to signal to local governments and the planning profession that light rail transit was no longer to be treated as "the forgotten mode," and that UMTA, while remaining "modally neutral," intended to restore light rail technology to the position of legitimacy it once held in this country. We were happy to hear last night that this is still UMTA's position.

TRB's involvement with light rail transit did not end with the Philadelphia conference. Following that meeting, the Board created a full-fledged committee on light rail transit. That committee sparked a number of efforts to increase awareness and foster research about light rail transit. These efforts have included a special seminar, several LRT sessions at the annual meetings, and the publication of *LRT News*, the first issue of which appeared in October 1978 and which has been appearing occasionally ever since.

In the meantime, the federal government continued its active support of light rail transit. In December 1975, UMTA issued a formal policy statement in which it reaffirmed its belief in LRT as a "potentially attractive transit concept" and announced intention to "assist in the deployment of modern light rail transit in a city or cities where proper conditions for this type of service are found to exist." Eight months later, in August 1976, UMTA released a state-of-the-art report on light rail transit. This report quickly became the standard reference on light rail technology and has been something of a bestseller as government publications go.

By the end of 1977, it was becoming clear that the message was sinking in. Several cities with existing streetcar networks—Boston, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Newark—were announcing plans for major system upgradings. Buffalo became the first beneficiary of a federal grant for a light rail line; Portland, Oregon, was the second. In the meantime, Edmonton was well on its way toward completing the first entirely new postwar light rail system in North America, and Calgary was announcing plans to follow in Edmonton's footsteps. By the time of the Second National Conference on Light Rail Transit, held in Boston in August 1977, TRB was able to report that no less than 29 cities in North America were contemplating light rail transit.

The trend toward LRT was being reinforced by esca-

lating costs of conventional rapid transit. In March 1978, the Department of Transportation was moved to take official notice of this fact in its Statement of Policy on Rail Transit. Said the Department:

Urban areas will have to demonstrate a compelling need for high-capacity, high-performance transit in order to obtain Federal assistance for rail transit. Light rail transit, operating partially or fully on surface rights-of-way, may offer a substantially less costly, less disruptive and more flexible option, and should be seriously considered by localities bent on improving their transit systems. (Federal Register, March 7, 1978)

The momentum of the late 1970s continued into the 1980s. Today, more than ever, light rail transit appears on local rail planning agendas. Virtually all North American cities contemplating rail transit today are thinking in terms of light rail technology. These cities include Los Angeles/Long Beach, Denver, Detroit, Portland, Sacramento, Santa Clara County, and Vancouver. Urban Rail in America, a recent study by the Regional Plan Association, estimates that, based on potential travel volumes, 10 other U.S. cities are candidates for light rail lines: Seattle, Honolulu, Houston, Dallas, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Indianapolis, Louisville, and Cincinnati. Light rail also seems to dominate the thinking of vehicle suppliers. No fewer than eight manufacturers are competing for what promises to be a sizable market for new light rail cars over the next decade. According to *Railway Age*, a replacement market for more than 600 vehicles, together with the equipment needs for more than half a dozen new or expanded systems, could generate orders for more than a thousand new cars by the end of the decade.

Thus, this Third Light Rail Conference opens on a different note than the first two. In Philadelphia and Boston, we were still trying to determine what role, if any, LRT could play in the transportation future of American cities. We were still at the stage of finding out whether LRT made sense. Today, thanks to San Diego and our Canadian friends, we no longer have these doubts. We have proof that light rail transit works—indeed, that it not only makes eminent sense, but that, given current fiscal constraints, it may realistically be the only rail option available to our cities.

So the focus of this conference shifts from existential concerns to concrete issues of implementation. While there is always room to debate feasibility criteria and to discuss "when and where LRT works best," our emphasis in this conference will be on the pragmatic questions: how to design, build, and operate LRT systems most economically, and how to finance them in today's environment of limited federal assistance and tight state and local budgets. The last question is especially important, for the best conceived plans and designs will be of little use if adequate funds are not found.

It might be instructive to look at foreign experience. In Japan, private land development companies build rail links to connect new suburban developments with metropolitan transit systems, and they do so without government assistance. In other parts of the world, private companies operate profitable rail transit services in publicly built and owned facilities, under turn-key franchise agreements with municipalities. These examples show that we may have applied much less imagination and creativity to issues of financing and operation than we have to the planning and design of light rail systems. Innovative public and private partnership approaches may not be the best way to get rail systems built in the future—they may be the only way.