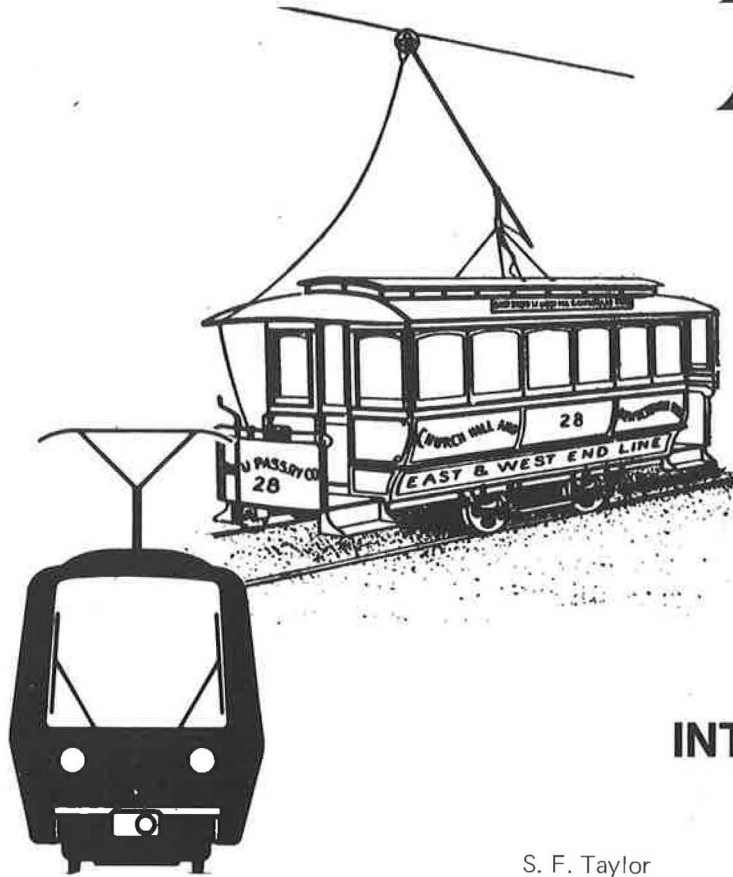


Feature Articles



LIGHT RAIL TRANSIT OUT OF HISTORY INTO NEW SOLUTIONS FOR URBAN MOBILITY

S. F. Taylor

Throughout America, a number of transportation museums display examples of the electric trolley car. Along with the steam locomotive it made a significant contribution to the nation's development during the Industrial Revolution, but changes in transportation relegated the trolley to an honorable place in the halls of history.

Therefore, considerable surprise was generated by a recent spate of articles in leading publications (among them, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, and *Business Week*) on the resurgence of the trolley car. The catalyst for such widespread publicity was the National Conference on Light Rail Transit, which the Transportation Research Board jointly sponsored with the Urban Mass Transportation Administration, the American Public Transit Association, and the University of Pennsylvania.

Light rail transit is the new term for dual-rail, electrically powered, fixed-guideway systems that are occasionally located in public arteries like the streetcar of

yesteryear, but are more commonly located on exclusive rights-of-way to avoid the interference of general traffic. The underlying theme of the 3-day conference was that, although light rail transit has its origins in street railway technology, it has markedly progressed in so many aspects that a totally new urban transport mode has emerged.

More than 600 people registered at the Philadelphia meeting. A number of professionals saw this high interest as a reflection of the fact that intense efforts during the past decade to improve urban mobility have not produced impressive results. Most research effort has been geared to high-cost, advanced technology solutions while worldwide inflation and shortfalls in development appear to have limited their application. In contrast, light rail transit is best characterized as an evolutionary technology, continually advancing from one stage of proven performance to the next.

For this reason there is more development in light rail transit than in any other mode. More than 80 systems throughout the world are upgrading or extending lines, modernizing facilities, and acquiring new vehicles. Totally

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