

June 11, 2007

City's White Elephant Now Looks Like a Transit Workhorse

By SEAN D. HAMILL

MORGANTOWN, W.Va., June 4 — During its troubled years of construction and testing in the early 1970s, the Personal Rapid Transit system that snakes through this hilly college town was derided as a fiasco and a waste of money that perhaps should be dynamited rather than finished.

But now, 32 years after it began operating, the P.R.T. — as most people here call it — is lauded as probably the best answer to the traffic that has found its way to these increasingly popular Appalachian hills.

“I would hate to see Morgantown without the P.R.T. system,” said Mayor Ronald Justice. “We’re a small town with big traffic issues, and the P.R.T. could be the reason we’re able to continue our growth.”

Originally built to shuttle students and employees between [West Virginia University](#)’s two campuses, which sit two miles apart, Morgantown now sees it as more than just a way to get students to class on time. With commuting times increasing in the region, the university, which operates the system, is considering expanding it.

The two leading proposals are an extension at the southern end of the line along the Monongahela River into the Wharf District, which city officials hope will be a mix of hotels, restaurants and retail shops; another would go farther north into the research park the university is developing, an area that could become home to a distant park-and-ride facility.

If the P.R.T. expands — at a cost of up to \$30 million to \$40 million a mile — it would add to the lore that has built up around Morgantown’s system, which is studied by transit experts from around the world.

Riders can push a button and select which of the five stops they want on the system’s 3.6-mile route; it is like a horizontal elevator that can go 30 miles per hour. The driverless, 21-passenger fiberglass cars, gliding on rubber wheels and powered by electric motors, pick up riders and

deliver them to their stops quickly, bypassing intermediate stations along the concrete and steel guide way. It is this individualized destination option that sets it apart from other cities' systems.

"This is the only operating P.R.T. system in the world," said Larry Fabian, treasurer of the Advanced Transit Association, an organization based in Virginia that promotes advanced rapid transit technologies and held a conference in May in Morgantown. "After more than 30 years, it's still unique."

But it is also expensive.

University and local government officials realize they are not likely to get the federal government to finance the expansion, as it did the original project. They are talking about coming up with local and state financing.

Not everyone thinks so highly of the P.R.T.

"The infrastructure requirements are such that it is not realistic to think it could be adopted in highly developed U.S. cities," Jonathan E. D. Richmond, a transportation expert, said in an e-mail message from Singapore, where he is advising the government.

From July 2005 to June 2006, some 2.25 million rides were taken on the P.R.T.

After a decline in ridership during the 1990s, the number of rides has increased roughly 10 percent a year over the last five years, but nonstudent and nonemployee ridership has stayed relatively constant, about 80,000 rides a year.

Students ride as often as they like after paying a fee of \$63 per semester, which pays for 60 percent of the system's \$3 million annual operating costs. The system essentially breaks even after the university picks up the cost for university employees and everyone else pays 50 cents per ride.

The P.R.T. was originally seen as a way to solve Morgantown's student traffic woes.

Though Morgantown was and is a relatively small urban area — 63,000 people in 1970 versus 84,000 now — getting students to class on time became a challenge in the 1960s when the university outgrew its downtown campus and opened a campus in Evansdale two miles away.

The idea might have died a swift political death, but when it was proposed in 1969 it served the political needs of President [Richard M. Nixon](#), who wanted a demonstration project to usher in

an era of urban mass transit.

The system was projected to cost \$13.7 million. By 1974, after \$57 million had been spent, engineers were still working out kinks in the system. One researcher proposed that students be given golf carts so that at least they could ride them on the P.R.T. guide way.

The first phase was opened in 1975. By the time the second phase was finished in 1979, the system had cost \$138 million.

Despite the early missteps, the P.R.T. in the years since has become a symbol of reliability, never having caused a serious injury and running 98 percent of the time.

"It's indispensable," Debolina Ganguly, 29, a graduate student in biology, said as she rode between classes high along the Monongahela River. "It's a nice view, but the best part is it's fast."

It is so reliable that after moving to Morgantown a year ago, Ms. Ganguly sold her car.

Still, it does not run often enough for people who do not attend the university or work there.

"There's a real problem," said Bruce Summers, 64, who has lived in Morgantown for 34 years and works downtown. "When the university is not in session, it's closed. You can't rely on it. If you want to get downtown people to use it, you've got to do it another way."

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
