

# Richmond Times-Dispatch

## Region should lead on green transportation



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JOHN REID BLACKWELL TIMES-  
DISPATCH STAFF WRITER  
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Richmonders love their cars.

About 88 percent of the Richmond region's commuters travel to and from work in a car, typically alone, said John Martin, president and chief executive officer of the Southeastern Institute of Research in Richmond.

That's one of the highest rates in the state of what is called "single occupancy vehicle" transportation, he said.

That will need to change if the region wants to maintain its relative ease of mobility as the population grows, some alternative transportation advocates told a regional planning group yesterday.

"We think there needs to be a shift -- a new paradigm -- to a transportation system that is more sustainable," Martin said.

Martin spoke to the Richmond Regional Planning District Commission on behalf of a group called STIR, or Sustainable Transportation Initiative of Richmond. The group of local business owners, civic and educational leaders and executives has been promoting alternative, environmentally friendly vehicles and transportation systems in the Richmond area.

For STIR, the future of transportation is not one barren of automobiles.

Rather, the group envisions an integrated system that would include a variety of transportation options, including energy-efficient modes such as electric cars, motorcycles, buses and bikes, as well as personal transporters such as the Segway.

"It's really a quality-of-life issue," said Buck Ward, owner of the Segway of Richmond dealership and a member of STIR's executive committee

Ward brought several Segway personal transporters to yesterday's meeting for Planning District Commission members to test-ride in the agency's parking lot at Stony Point Office Park in South Richmond.

Also on display were a plug-in electric hybrid vehicle from utility company Dominion Resources Inc. and a GRTC bus that has a reduced seating capacity and uses less fuel for lower-volume routes.

Eric Engler, who owns the Velocity Motorcycles store in Richmond, brought one of his store's Zero brand of electric motorcycles.

Depending on the model, the plug-in motorcycle has a range of 40 to 60 miles, which Engler sees as a great option for urban commuters. "It runs on about a penny or less of electricity per mile," he said.

STIR members said a shift to alternative transportation is important for economic development, too.

In one recent survey of local employers, 80 percent ranked the Richmond region as a good place to do business, and ease of transportation was a key reason. The average commute time is 23 minutes, less than the state average of 28 minutes.

Yet with the region's population expected to grow about 28 percent by 2030, the days of relatively easy commuting are numbered, Martin told the commission. "That means more congestion and higher commute times," he said.

STIR wants to get the private and public sectors involved in alternative transportation.

One of the group's goals is to recruit 500 local businesses to become "ambassadors" for the cause, including the promotion of options such as ride sharing among their own employees. The group also wants to get at least 10,000 local residents actively involved in using and promoting alternative transportation.

Another goal is to have the Richmond area become a test region for Ford Motor Co.'s Urban Mobility Network Project and, separately, GM/Segway's PUMA project. Both projects aim to test alternative transportation concepts and products in urban areas.

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Contact John Reid Blackwell at (804) 775-8123 or [jblackwell@timesdispatch.com](mailto:jblackwell@timesdispatch.com).