

A Christmas Train Puzzle

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Volume I, No. 23. December 11, 2009

Few things are as frustrating as finding that one's jigsaw puzzle is missing critical pieces. Virginians are looking to Washington and Richmond to deliver, early next year, on President Obama's high-speed-rail vision for America. As this is written, Federal Rail Administration staff, and their U. S. DOT overseers (and probably White House political operatives), are pouring over dozens of seemingly worthy state finalists among the grant applications, all competing for at a minimum of \$8 billion of funding that is supposedly available to states to jump start higher-speed passenger rail corridor development. Funding is to come, initially at least, from the 2009 ARRA "stimulus" package.

If public trust and responsibility considerations are to be accorded high priority, as they should, then FRA has a huge underwriting challenge on its hands. Applications came in from more than half the states, aggregating better than \$ 50 billion. Virginia put in for about \$1.8 billion, and North Carolina for more than \$5 billion, including \$3.7 billion to restore and improve the *Virginia* line between Raleigh and Petersburg. FRA, with limited staff resources, has never before confronted anything quite like this.

Funding decisions presumably will include consideration of the past "track record" of each operator, *initially Amtrak*; of the host railroad, in Virginia's case, *mostly CSX*; and of each State DOT rail division or department; in our case *VA DRPT*. Amtrak has had a revolving door for CEO's, and has lived year-to-year under threats to shut it down. Only recently has Amtrak begun struggling to transform itself from an unwanted stepchild (or an even less flattering term!) to a growth organization. CSX spent much of the past decade attempting to instill operating discipline under the leadership of a highly-regarded ex-NS official, but CSX is still not quite there yet. Freight trains continue to jump the track, and break down, and encounter switch, signal and rail problems (reference recent VA-DC experiences on CSX). Not infrequently buses have to be substituted for Amtrak trains. Now we await yet another CSX COO. Then, there is Virginia. DRPT has had five departmental directors, or acting directors, within the past nine years. Continuity has suffered. Cometh now Governor McDonnell. What might we expect? An infusion of business savvy and circumspection would help.

Finally, news comes that CSX has declined to operate an additional Amtrak round-trip north of Richmond, a new train which Governor Kaine had miraculously funded for a December 15 start. CSX says this would conflict with restoration of the third track on Franconia Hill. If CSX can't figure out how to do that in today's recession-depressed freight environment (a fete RF&P forces successfully performed under similar, or higher, train volume in 1946-47), one has to wonder how we can ever get a third track built to Richmond without jeopardizing existing Amtrak and VRE service? Many pieces of this puzzle are still missing. The lack of "can do" is

of greater potential concern than the disappointment at not finding Tim Kaine's new train under our Christmas tree.

Can any good come of all this in 2010? We remain hopeful!

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