

A Plan for Hampton Roads Rail

By Richard L. Beadles

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Yesterday's announcement by President Obama and his administration of High Speed Rail grants seems to suggest that Virginia may have gotten the short end of the stick. Political considerations may have been a factor. But let's not overlook the "shovel-ready" test. Virginia was apparently not as *ready* as was North Carolina. They have been at it since 1992. Virginia was much later getting started.

The quest for design of the Virginia system of passenger rail goes on. Unresolved for more than a decade has been the tough question of how best to serve this vast urban area inclusive of Williamsburg, Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Virginia Beach, Chesapeake and Suffolk. This is indeed a challenge. One could be more sympathetic with Virginia's rail planners were it not for the foot-dragging and lengthy periods of "down" time in the process, especially during critical years 2006-2008.

A series of public hearings was held earlier this week. The Federal Railroad Administration and Virginia's DRPT are seeking public comments on a 386-page Draft Environmental Impact Statement. We confess to only having scanned the document. Nevertheless, the proper course of action seems abundantly clear. Availability of federal funding or not, we need a PLAN, because passenger rail is on the ascendancy once again, and we must not miss future funding opportunities. Here is what we would do, in regard to Hampton Roads:

1. Preserve and improve what we have: the limited Amtrak service to Newport News.
2. Move forward aggressively to restore conventional service to Norfolk, via Petersburg.
3. Take advantage of every opportunity to add capacity, speed, frequency, and quality of service on both routes, to Newport News and Norfolk, without according either route a preference; acting upon favorable cost-benefit ratios, the availability of funding, and host-railroad willingness to be accommodating.
4. Design, fund and construct the same higher-speed rail infrastructure between Richmond and Petersburg, as is contemplated for DC to Richmond, so as to accommodate future HSR service to North Carolina, as well as similar service to Norfolk.
5. Incorporate true high-speed rail in sections of a new interstate-like 460 between Petersburg and Suffolk.
6. Insure that future intermodal freight service options and opportunities are incorporated and preserved in all new publicly-funded rail infrastructure.
7. Take seriously the possibility that constraints associated with rail infrastructure at, and around, Main Street Station, Richmond, will not degrade the rail transportation benefits that would otherwise come from steps one through six, above. If we really believe that rail is going

to be a critical component of our future Eastern Virginia Megapolitan area, then formulate a 2050 plan for it, because steps Nos. 1-6 above may not then be sufficient.

When the Commonwealth Transportation Board next meets, let's hope they resolve to take a course of action such as that outlined above. We must have "shovel-ready" plans next time. There will be future funding opportunities!

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