

A Timely Convergence of Events

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Two recent events bode well for the future of the south side of Hampton Roads, and together they represent an unprecedented opportunity in the realm of common-sense transportation planning. This could be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the region, a chance to optimize corridor utility in a way that yields greater return on investment, enhances safety, and encourages smart growth in the next, great, hot spot in Virginia.

On November 4, Governor-Elect Bob McDonnell announced that his top transportation priority would be a new Route 460 between Petersburg and Suffolk. Five days earlier, elected officials from the region unanimously agreed to ask the Federal Railroad Administration to designate the same general route for future development of high speed rail to serve Hampton Roads. Wouldn't it make good sense to design the new highway corridor to incorporate a future rail right-of-way? Unfortunately, such an obvious plan has not heretofore been embraced by Virginia transportation planners. Bob McDonnell could change all that in a hurry.

Many people speak admiringly of the 52-mile arrow-straight Norfolk Southern rail route between Petersburg and Suffolk, but let's take a closer look. This splendid double-track NS line bores straight through a half-dozen towns, encounters some 22 at-grade public highway crossings and about a dozen private ones. While satisfactory for convention rail operations, existing conditions would not be appropriate for true high speed rail passenger and, in fact, not desirable either for the increased rail-highway (intermodal) trains anticipated from growth in container traffic at the Port.

Now is the time to design an inclusive transportation corridor, to accommodate everything we may need for the next fifty years, including (if the parties desire it) a re-routing of the existing NS line such that it bypasses the towns on a totally grade-separated right-of-way, just as the new highway will do. Regional political leaders have demonstrated vision and bold leadership. NS, under the guiding hand of CEO Wick Moorman, appears to be comfortable exploring various public-private partnerships, and now we have a Governor-Elect with a natural affinity for the future of southeastern Virginia. We may not have the construction money in hand for some time, but good planning is relatively inexpensive, and pays big dividends in years to come.

Lastly, let us take this opportunity to salute and applaud the statesmanship reflected in the October 30 regional decision by representatives from the Peninsula. The rail line linking Newport News, Hampton and Williamsburg to Richmond and the northeast corridor must receive its fair share of public investment. It has some

conventional rail passenger service, which must be improved and enhanced simultaneously with priority efforts to re-establish service to Norfolk and south side communities. Hampton Roads deserves the best we can provide, via both routes.

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