

AMAZING VA Rail Funding Development!

by Richard L. Beadles

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News was flashed to many of us last Saturday afternoon by Danny Plaucher, executive director of Virginians for High Speed Rail, that the Senate of Virginia, moments earlier, had voted 25-15 to pass a comprehensive State transportation funding overhaul. This was the first sweeping update of Virginia transportation funding in almost 27 years. Remarkably, rail – which was not a major participant in the 1986 transportation bill – emerged with a very respectable place in the mix of modes to be funded going forward.

While Virginia support of rail (freight as well as intercity passenger) has been gaining momentum for over a decade, notably with establishment of the 2005 Rail Enhancement Fund, this latest development is particularly important in that it will provide about \$50 million annually, from a dedicated source, to the Intercity Passenger Rail Operating and Capital Fund (“IPROC”), thereby insuring continued funding of Amtrak Virginia Regional Services, and greatly increases the likelihood of further upgrading of routes and the augmentation and extension of services.

Plaucher estimates that over the next decade, some \$798 million of Virginia funds should be available to be spent on rail --freight and intercity passenger.

In 1871, the Commonwealth of Virginia – which, like many other states in the 19th century, had been a major investor in railroads -- voted to sell all of its rail securities. For the next 100 years, Virginia took no real interest in railroads, except to tax and regulate them. Gradually, starting in the 1970s, the State began a slow, incremental, process of tip-toeing back into a position of tepid support of its intercity railroads. Now, it appears we have come almost full circle. Not really, we won't be buying rail stock! It is now abundantly clear however that, from a policy standpoint, the State of Virginia now regards rail transportation as a vital part of the mix, and is willing to put public funds behind that position to the extent specific circumstances and conditions warrant.

Two thoughts emerge from the dust of recent legislative debate and maneuvering within Virginia's Capitol Square: First, the rail mode of transportation -- which was almost written off as obsolete by many transportation planners in the 1950s, sixties, and seventies -- is enjoying a renaissance of remarkable ascendancy in Virginia and elsewhere across the United States. Second, Virginia -- which has occasionally been labeled as slow to move forward on progressive issues -- is now clearly among the most innovative of states in transportation funding, including that of rail.

Take a bow, all who made this possible!

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