

An Intolerable Situation in Need of Attention

by Richard L. Beadles

Volume IV, No. 16. August 30, 2012.

If one expects to continue providing rail service – be that freight or passenger – there is no higher priority than that of maintaining track and related infrastructure in a state of good repair. That said, current maintenance practices, which are technologically sophisticated and highly mechanized, often pose serious conflicts with respect to train operations, which are normally programmed to meet the service needs of the customer.

Traditionally, labor-intensive track maintenance crews often worked in between trains, thus minimizing conflict – at least that was the objective. Today, the need to maximize track time for miles-long, hugely-expensive, yet highly-productive, track maintenance armadas exacerbates long-standing competition between MofW and marketing departments, and customer demands. Maintenance forces often prevail!

While current track maintenance practices are necessarily disruptive of train service virtually everywhere they work, the adverse impact on predominantly-single-track rail routes, such as the CSX Peninsula Subdivision east of Richmond, can be devastating for passenger services, such as the popular Boston-New York-DC-Richmond-Williamsburg-Newport News Amtrak route. [CSX simply holds back their coal until the line is again available for trains, and, presumably, no revenue is lost in the process.].

The past six weeks presented one of the most severe examples yet of interruptions of Amtrak service to Main Street Station, Williamsburg and Newport News. Half of the normal service to these locations was eliminated four (4) weekdays in each and every week for approximately six weeks this summer. A cursory, and preliminary, look at the numbers, suggests that Amtrak ridership took a hit. How many riders and how much revenue was lost, we can't say, but we do know that Amtrak costs were not reduced; in fact, they went up! For example, extra labor costs were incurred deadheading crews to be in place to operate an early morning train from Newport News as part of the effort to compensate for other train cancellations. Some Amtrak rolling stock stood idle.

Could this unfortunate situation have been mitigated, and if so how? The most obvious question is why couldn't the CSX maintenance work have been programmed for the late evening and overnight hours, when there is a ten-hour (10-hour) window with no Amtrak trains on the line? We wonder if anyone at Amtrak even inquired of CSX? Performance of such work at night is not without precedent, even in Virginia. Substitute bus service east of Richmond is another, but less desirable, option. Was anybody there?

Come October 1, 2013, the State of VA will assume financial responsibility for these Amtrak trains. DRPT should then be in position to exercise greater oversight. That's the minimum. The next step is to revive an earlier plan to begin restoring double

track, and related improvements, east of Richmond. That plan was effectively scuttled several years ago when the opportunity to restore Amtrak service to Norfolk presented itself. The needs of Richmond, and Peninsula points east, now deserve attention. # # #