

Can DRPT Manage Amtrak Virginia?

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Amtrak, the country's current proxy for a national intercity passenger rail network, was legislated out of a lengthy stay in federal purgatory when congress passed, and President Bush signed on October 16, the Rail Safety and Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Acts of 2008. Notwithstanding the continuing absence of adequate congressional appropriations to implement all of the ambitious goals and objectives in the two Acts, this long-awaited, and forward-looking, Amtrak reauthorization should put to rest - - hopefully forever - - any public policy question about the future of intercity passenger rail service in America. Could it be the dawn of a new era?

Last year, Amtrak experienced yet another record-breaking year in ridership (Amtrak's F.Y. ends September 30). Driven in part by high gasoline prices, passenger growth momentum has generally been sustained, albeit at a diminished rate, even with the subsequent precipitous decline in gas prices, and a collapsing national economy. For example, at Richmond's downtown Main Street Station, where Amtrak service is very limited, ridership was up 26 % in December. It is clear that people want, and will use, intercity passenger rail service, even when it is substandard. The implication is quite clear; provide more and better service and people will use it in ever-increasing numbers.

In Virginia, the best Amtrak news of the year was word out of the Department of Rail & Public Transportation ("DRPT") that the State of Virginia is planning to sponsor the inauguration of two additional Amtrak roundtrips, one between Richmond and Washington, and the other from Lynchburg to DC and return. Apparently, it was the personal interest and commitment of Governor Tim Kaine that has and will make these important additions to Virginia service possible. Unless thwarted by financial or other problems, we may see these new services within a year. This would be unprecedented.

The bad news in Virginia is that too many Amtrak trains run late. This varies from line to line and train to train, but overall only about 60% arrive within fifteen minutes of schedule. The most deplorable situation last fall was between Richmond-Williamsburg and Newport News, where deferred maintenance has caught up with the host railroad. For a 75-mile run, even a 15-minute delay is too much; delays of an hour or more simply cannot be tolerated.

Someone needs to manage the State's financial interest in Amtrak train service, on a daily basis. DRPT is probably doing the best it can at the moment, following the departure of a director whose tenure was marked by upheaval, confusion, and discord. Acting director Chip Badger and rail chief, Kevin Page, are thinly-stretched. It may be that DRPT is not adequately structured, nor staffed, to do everything currently approved

and contemplated. If Virginia is to have a first-rate rail program, DRPT must have the capability to plan, design, and execute better in the future. This matter needs attention.

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