

Eastern Virginia's Rail Infrastructure Deficit

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For many years now, it has been apparent that eventually the urban footprint(s) of Northern Virginia, the Richmond-Tri-Cities Region, and Hampton Roads would expand to touch, and ultimately overlap, each other. This part of the State of Virginia has been characterized as being of the 11+ million (population) MD-DC-VA Chesapeake “*Megapolitan*” Area, or the “Eastern Urban Crescent” of the Commonwealth. Now some of the local and inter-regional elected officials, and others, have begun to take the possibilities seriously. Reportedly, they met recently to discuss the this “*Golden Crescent*”, and what it might mean if we stopped trying to compete with one another and began to promote the mega-region as one, especially to national and global audiences. In a July 1 OpEd in the RTD, Jim Oliver, chairman of the Hampton Roads Center for Civic Engagement, cited the following statistics: Our Virginia “*Golden Crescent*” is said to include 68% of the State’s population, on only 24% of the State’s land; it accounts for 72% of Virginia employment, and 79% of the State’s economy. Impressive, indeed!

Oliver wrote that, among other things, the officials agreed on the need for “*multi-modal rail and transit, in addition to roads and bridges*”. If that’s the case, somebody had better tell members of the General Assembly, as well as our Congressional delegation, where business as usual goes on; to wit, the recently-agreed upon two-year extension of the federal surface transportation (“*Highway*”) bill, that failed to include a proposed “rail” title, appears to actually provide less for rail and transit than the Act which it superseded -- but worse yet, it includes some serious disincentives relative to the use rail and transit. How is that for staying in touch with the people back home?

While we could not agree more with the support voiced by Jim Oliver for multi-modal and intermodal solutions, the fact is that Virginia’s *Golden Crescent* has a serious deficit in rail infrastructure. This region, with 68% of the State’s population, has only about 25% of the Commonwealth’s rail route mileage. With 79% of the Virginia economy, the *Golden Crescent* has fewer than 500 rail route-miles that are up to the standards normally deemed appropriate for intercity passenger, commuter and intermodal freight. That represents only 60%, or less, of the *Crescent*’s meager rail route mileage.

Of course, there is another dimension to rail capacity; namely, second and third main tracks, high-speed crossovers, and state-of-the-art signal and control systems. A fair amount of that type of work is currently underway, paid for by the taxpayers of Virginia, but even if the pace of such public investment were quickened significantly, we will still be behind the curve in years to come. Hopefully, the point is obvious; if rail and transit are deemed necessary to achieve our super-regional development dreams, we had better figure out what Virginia rail 2050 needs to look like, and find ways to develop it.

This is a nice challenge, but it requires serious planning, and elected officials who are willing to stand up and be counted in Capitol Square, and on Capitol Hill. # # # #