

Election Implications for Rail

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It came as no surprise, but the Republican take-over of the House, plus the equally-significant wave of victories among state governors, does not bode well for some new rail infrastructure and service development projects. In the short run, it is likely to slow, or even stop, recent rail progress. Over the longer term, it means little. Why? Because there are so few other good options and alternatives to expanding rail capacity and service - both freight and passenger. Rail is destined to play a larger role in our future. The recent political changes will likely add time and cost to the inevitable.

The following will offend and possibly infuriate the Tea Party types, but we are already socialists; we have been, and increasingly so, since the 1930's with the coming of FDR's New Deal. The Tea Party folks couldn't get out of their driveways in their SUV's without our socialistic transportation system, and we don't have the stomach to change that. Watch what happens to the recent 460 "privatization" proposal to construct and operate a new Route 460 east of Petersburg with toll charges up to \$75 per tandem trailer.

They can rant and rave, and wear funny-looking hats, but the drift toward a more socialistic society reminds one of watching the Atlantic Ocean chew up and wash away the sand dunes along North Carolina's Outer Banks. Some years the ocean takes out quite a bit of dune line; other years it restores some, but over the decades it just keeps moving the line of dunes inland. And so it is [regrettably] with our socialistic migration.

Should we do anything to amend the political process, as related to transportation policy and funding? By all means, the answer should be a resounding "Yes". Missed opportunities are legend, but let us stick with Virginia rail. Public funds are sometimes disbursed, as though they were an entitlement, without getting good value in return. We regularly hand out grants of free cash to some of the most affluent private corporations operating in the state, sometimes with questionable public justification and less public accountability. And then there is the \$45 million recently awarded (or promised) by the Feds to Virginia for planning and preliminary engineering on the Richmond-DC High(er) Speed Rail project. One can hardly imagine how we could spend so much money efficiently and productively without constructing a single thing. Part of this is due to overblown federal regulations, or at least the interpretations placed upon such regulations. The other part of the problem is at the State level, where the Virginia Dept. of Rail has spent millions over the past decade on consultants, studies and reports that now, it appears, are to be redone. Fortunately, Virginia is making progress, but the past decade of State rail advancement was not nearly as productive as it might have been.

There will likely be some positive results arising from the recent election. The history of public sponsorship, and funding, of rail development in Virginia goes back to 1830. The pendulum has swung several times. Our prediction is that come 2030, the bi-centennial of rail in Virginia, those of you who are still around will see more, rather than less, public support of rail in the Old Dominion. It simply has to happen!

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