

Fixing Richmond Terminal

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Syndicated columnist Robert Samuelson, noted for his gloom and doom viewpoint, recently wrote that “**High-Speed Rail Is Just Another Boondoggle**”. (RTD 8/25/09). Although his piece reveals more about his lack of understanding of what is proposed, and his bias against big government projects in general, it is nevertheless worth the reminder that prudence, efficiency, economy, and *results*, will be imperatives in the spending of federal stimulus funds on rail projects.

While it is unlikely that we will see any rail “boondoggles” in Virginia, we may see some high-priced, limited-benefit, projects unless we are particularly careful to avoid such pitfalls. One such potential situation could result from the otherwise commendable effort to fix what is now being called “Richmond Terminal”; the CSX lines, yards, and terminal facilities in and around Richmond, including the Acca Yard complex.

What we now refer to as Richmond Terminal has evolved over the past four decades, witnessing many physical and operational changes, some of which have degraded capacity and throughput. Rail mergers and consolidation projects resulted in the abandonment and reconfiguration of infrastructure. The entire terminal complex has also seen unprecedented alterations in rail traffic patterns. The former RF&P route, including Acca, has been flooded with freight traffic formerly routed via other lines. This has been especially detrimental to passenger train operation, even though all railroads, including CSX, were obliged to maintain certain levels of “utility” pursuant to the original 1971 Amtrak agreement. This clearly did not happen at Acca, nor elsewhere in the rail freight industry. In 1981, prior to many of these changes, the DC-Richmond-Newport News route was one of Amtrak’s best performers in the entire national system.

Now we read (RTD 8/15/09) that the State of Virginia and CSX are close to finalizing plans for a \$90-million to a \$100-million fix to hasten the passage of Amtrak trains through Acca Yard, apparently with a goal of getting Amtrak trains going 45 miles an hour through Acca. *Forty years ago, many passenger trains averaged 60 m.p.h. through Acca!* Obviously, there is more to the fix than just Acca. Main Street Station itself is a problem; always was and is likely to be for many years to come. Some improvements can be made, but not enough to avoid serious train conflicts, particularly on the north-south route, where the fastest and best route appears likely to be sacrificed in order to force all Amtrak trains through Main Street Station.

The other critical issue is rail operations. No amount of infrastructure investment will completely overcome poor execution. What’s to keep CSX from encroaching upon new passenger-train tracks as they have historically done at Acca? No doubt, the State

Rail people, as well as CSX, and Amtrak, are working hard on these challenges, but we have got to wind up with something better than we had forty years ago. Otherwise, the likes of Robert Samuelson will have a field day, and they should! #####