

# Giving Thanks for Amtrak

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Thanksgiving is a busy time for all almost all modes of transportation, especially for Amtrak in Virginia. The day before Thanksgiving Day, Amtrak boarded about 274 passengers on the northbound Lynchburg train at Charlottesville, and about 209 on a northbound Newport News train at Williamsburg the prior afternoon. It is obvious that UVA and W&M contributed significantly to these two counts. It should also be obvious that most of these passengers were relatively affluent and had other travel options. So what's going on? According to at least two Republican governors-elect, the people have spoken, and based on their interpretation of what the people want, "*the train is dead!*"

The offspring of an unlikely liaison between partners with incompatible goals and objectives; namely, the Nixon White House and the congress, on one hand, and the private railroads on the other, Amtrak has from its birth in 1971 been an unloved, unappreciated and unwanted child. The parents who conceived Amtrak hoped that it would grow up and go away, but it has not. Instead of withering away, Amtrak has been attracting more passengers every year, despite the best efforts of numerous government officials, the most notorious being Norman Mineta, a prominent Democrat, while serving as secretary of transportation, 2001-2006, in the administration of President Bush.

It is not as though Amtrak has always been easy to love. Things began boisterously with a group of former airline people in charge, who were at times arrogant and dismissive of anything the private railroads had previously done. There was bad blood from the beginning. It took the adolescent Amtrak, and its revolving door leadership, too long to figure out that the old railroads did, in fact, know a thing or two. In the meantime, Amtrak made some of the same mistakes that the railroads had made.

However, Amtrak has done, and is doing, a lot of things right. Space does not permit a list of such accomplishments, but the Northeast Corridor improvement project, and the Acela train, are good examples. The corridor and the train are now aging, and in need of renewal, but the success of the Acela service stands as the fastest and most advanced intercity passenger rail in the U.S.A. And by the way, Conrail would never have emerged as the successful freight story that it did, but for the U.S. D.O.T.'s off-loading of the NEC onto the shoulders of Amtrak, a gift of vital infrastructure that keeps on *taking* -- capital investment! Corridor infrastructure is also critical to most of the urban commuter rail services operated by regional public entities between DC and Boston.

The new guys in town, referring to the next congress, will predictably start beating up on Amtrak, but if they really are listening to the people, they will refrain from taking punitive and

destructive action. Amtrak has kept intercity passenger rail service alive in the U.S. long enough to serve as the foundation upon which *expanded* high(er) speed rail will inevitably be developed. We should be happy that, in this case, the unintended consequences produced a positive result for the nation. Be thankful for Amtrak this holiday season.

## Postscript 29 November 2010

Thanksgiving has come and gone, but more holidays are ahead of us, which will involve travel for many Virginians. The attached VA Rail O&C salutes Amtrak which, according to my rough and very unofficial estimate, safely transported more than 25,000 passengers to and from Virginia stations over the past seven days. This is a conservative guesstimate, and does not include all the other passengers moved "overhead", that is with neither an "on" or "off" count in the Old Dominion.

With the exception of one Amtrak train (out of about 26 each day), which was delayed about three hours due to a locomotive failure at the expense of 185 unhappy travelers, all else appeared to work reasonably well over the holiday period.



It was good to see a number of very full Virginia trains, with loads of 500 or more; also to see Charlottesville and Williamsburg boardings and alightings in the range of 275-300 passengers on multiple trains over the Thanksgiving holiday. The college and university community has obviously rediscovered train travel. Only 26 travel days until Christmas!