

# Has Rail Solution got the *Solution*?

---

by Richard L. Beadles

Volume V, No. 22

November 30, 2013

We venture to say that most people who drive U.S. interstate highways would prefer to compete with fewer big trucks. In Virginia, I-81 is the most notorious example of too many big trucks, consuming more than what the average motorist would consider "their fair share" of the road. Currently, we would estimate that the ratio of trucks-on-81 to trucks-on-parallel-NS rail-line(s) is substantially in excess of 10-to-1.

Can this ratio be changed significantly to the relief of motorists and VDOT construction and maintenance budgets? Recently, VDOT announced substantial completion of a \$90 million I-81 project on Christiansburg Mountain to add another "truck-climbing lane". That is just the tip of the iceberg of what will be required over the next decade to repair the structural and road surface damage attributable to big trucks, and to add lane (and bridge) capacity. Norfolk Southern and the VA Department of Rail are also trying, but thus far their commendable, but modest, public-private effort appears destined to make little impact. Neither NS nor DRPT is yet publicly quantifying results.

Meanwhile, an independent Virginia-based group of rail advocates, calling themselves Rail Solution [www.railsolution.org](http://www.railsolution.org), is promoting an alternative with the name Steel Interstate System.. Simply described, their answer to the big truck problem would, as they envision it, do for rail the equivalent of what was done for roads in the Eisenhower Interstate Highway era. Bold in scope, extraordinarily expensive, and problematical, it could have some of the same transformational effects in rail Intermodal (highway-rail) transportation as were seen when old U.S. Route 11 was functionally augmented by the then-new I-81. The proposal is so daunting that no single private railroad, such as NS, could do it, nor could a single state. Only the federal government, on a national scale, working in partnership with private railroads and several states, could fund and build something as ambitious as what Rail Solution proposes. Has anyone the appetite for anything so bold? Probably not, but why not? If not, what is the answer?

It is tempting to simply write off this proposal as not feasible. But let's not jump to that conclusion just yet. Consider the costs and likely consequences of maintaining the current approach; that is, allocation of a few hundred million dollars each year to I-81, and a few hundred million in public grants to private railroad companies for enhancement of their infrastructure? So far, our efforts show no signs of significantly altering the ratio of trucks on the road to trucks on rail. Are we simply stuck with the status quo?

Some ask: Where are the private railroads? No rail CEO is likely to risk jeopardizing his company's dividend and market valuation, nor his job, on such an ambitious plan. Nor will political leaders likely be any less risk averse. Yet the public wants relief. It has been reported that Congress has fed \$40+ billion of our general fund tax dollars into the highway-trust fund in recent years, just to run in place. And, we have been spending as much or more, each year, in Afghanistan. Shouldn't we at least consider the Steel Interstate concept? Some parts, if not all, just might work.

---