

# If We Are Serious About Rail

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*North end of NS (former N&W) single-track bridge over the Potomac River, Shepherdstown, WV/MD - on the Crescent Corridor Intermodal Freight route.*

What's this, a theme park thrill ride? "No", it's one of only two main line rail links across the Potomac River! The other, the one more familiar to Virginians, is CSX's Long Bridge in D.C. Pictured below is the only realistic north-south alternative to Long Bridge in case we are denied use of the rail line through the District. Such a disruptive prospect is entirely possible at some time in the years ahead, given that freight trains operate within a short distance of the U.S. Capitol. Is anybody worrying? Probably. Is anybody doing anything about providing for that contingency? Perhaps, but what? Rerouting north-south freight through Cincinnati? We simply must get serious about rail infrastructure planning and development, for both freight and passenger, if Virginians expect rail to play a significantly larger role in meeting our transportation needs in the decades ahead.

Although the Commonwealth of Virginia has made great strides over the past decade in bringing rail into the total multi-modal transportation mix, much more needs to be done. Some of it does not necessarily cost a great deal of money, not initially anyway. Strategic thinking and

planning have not been the hallmarks of the State's approach to rail. With gubernatorial administrations changing every four years, and mid-level managing directors coming and going, we have not always pursued our rail planning with the focus and consistency we should. Too many starts, stops, skips, and detours thus far.

While White House politics certainly played a role in Virginia's poor showing in recent Federal rail funding allocations, the fact is that we should have been better prepared, and we were not. Ultimately, the Commonwealth may have to choose between two basic approaches. Continue the present practice of responding to grant requests from private railroads to fund *their* perceived needs and opportunities, or better yet, first determine what the State wishes to accomplish for the broader public benefit; design and build it, and enter into long-term contracts for use of such infrastructure by rail operators. The second approach might require a vehicle akin to the Virginia Port Authority, a concept bureaucrats, and policy makers, have not yet embraced. But, there has not been a major rail line constructed in Virginia for about 100 years. Private railroads are not likely to do that again. If ever we see such rail construction again, it will be done by the public.

An appropriate forum for such discussions would be the Virginia Rail Advisory Board, but the Board is in jeopardy of being abolished to save \$10,000. A Bad idea!