

Indispensible VA Rails: 183 Years and Counting

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It was in 1830 that the State of Virginia embarked upon a formal program of rail development. Most railroads were localized private initiatives, but the Commonwealth was often the majority shareholder. In two instances, the State undertook to construct rail lines as the sole owner-developer. The Civil War wrecked most of the railroads in Virginia, and the ability of the State to finance needed expansion. Northern, as well as foreign, investors took over. For the next 100+ years, the public-sector was out of the railroad business in Virginia, with one significant exception -- the RF&P -- in which the State's interest was maintained until 1991.

Immediately following World War II, public planners and policy makers pretty well wrote off the rail mode of transportation as being relevant to the transport and mobility needs of the nation. Almost all of the transportation energy and resources of the congress and of state legislatures went to promote and fund highway, aviation and inland waterway development. By 1970 (the year Penn Central went bust, and plans were coming together to launch Amtrak), the nations railroads were in a sorry state of physical, financial and "cultural" despair.

In 1991, just about the time Virginia was dumping its last railroad stock -- RF&P was divided between railroad and real estate in 1991, with CSX acquiring the railroad and the State Retirement System [VRS] taking the real estate -- there was a significant turning point in public perception regarding the importance and potential role of rail in Virginia. The year 1992 witnessed the launch of Virginia Railway Express, the highly -- popular commuter rail operation in Northern Virginia. This was a seminal event, because it required large-scale investment of public funds pursuant to agreements with two of the State's private railroads, each of which had much earlier unofficially "sworn off" operation of passenger trains and doing business with public authorities.

Since then, the pace of public investment in private railroad infrastructure has quickened significantly, especially in regard to the operation of passenger trains in conjunction with Amtrak. Just yesterday, in a State Capitol "signing" of the 2013 VA transportation funding bill, the way was cleared for Virginia to essentially take-over responsibility for 12 daily Amtrak trains originating or terminating in Virginia.

Now it may be time to do as much for rail freight; not a “take-over” but a substantial increase in support for intermodal (highway-rail) freight to serve Virginia shippers and receivers of *domestic* cargo. International is already fairly well served.

If you find this subject of interest, and desire to learn just where things now stand, and what the prospects are for the future, check the VA Rail Policy Institute web site www.varpi.org for more information on a program to be held next Monday, May 20, in Richmond. Pre-registration is required, and space is limited. But it promises to be interesting.

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