

Industrial Sprawl and Rusty Rails

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This is a great Country and a great State, but we do not plan very well. Americans still have that restless desire to sprawl in every direction, as though the supply of land and other critical resources is limitless. Normally we think of residential sprawl, but there is another type which has many of the same undesirable consequences. This involves manufacturing and distribution, especially the latter. Picture a hub and spoke.

Recently we took a driving tour of the traditional rail-served industrial areas in and around Richmond. As recently as the 1960's, there were at least a half-dozen centrally-located, rail-served, warehousing, distribution and manufacturing districts in and immediately adjacent to the hub of this metropolitan area. All were rail-served and regularly-and-reliably served by the five major roads then entering Richmond. Several hundreds of cars of freight were placed and pulled each twenty-four hours. Prior to the sixties, there was also a remarkably-efficient system known as reciprocal switching under which arrangement competitive rail freight service provided by the line-haul railroads was made available to almost all of our one-hundred or more major rail users. Railroads had a significant portion of the business, although it had declined from perhaps 80% at the end of World War II to maybe 50% by the sixties; currently 5% rail would be a guess.

Today, these former rail-served districts at, and near, the core of the metro area have either been transformed in character to totally non-industrial uses, such as the old RF&P Scotts Addition district, or are sparsely occupied by manufacturing and distribution tenants, almost all of which rely primarily upon truck. Abandoned rails and crossties are everywhere. Some, such as the old ACL (now CSX) Cofer Road district in South Richmond, have so few active rail customers as to render them marginal in terms of efficiency of rail operations and service. The same appears to be true with the former C&O (now CSX) Interport/Richmond Airport District. Others risk extinction of rail.

Some of this was self-inflicted by the railroads themselves. But there is yet another dimension, or several in fact. Public policy relative to taxation, land use and transportation in the second half of the 20th century encouraged the flight of industrial land users to the far reaches of the region. So now we have truck-served distributors at one end of a spoke servicing customers at the far end of another spoke, and the reverse. Inventory management and just-in-time business concepts fit hand-in-glove with public subsidy of highways and truck transportation. At the same time, we now have millions of square feet of vacant and obsolete industrial space sitting idle, around the region's hub, adjacent to active, under-utilized, rail lines. However, in some cases the railroads refuse to serve some of these sites without property-owner investment in rail

infrastructure that is often cost-prohibitive. Truck being cheaper, faster and more dependable, why do it?

Something is out of whack here. It's complicated. Can it be fixed? We don't know, but it deserves a look by leaders at all levels of government, as well as by the railroad companies themselves. A long shot perhaps, but a potential win-win.

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