

Introducing the Series

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Volume I, No. 1, January 16, 2009

Rail transportation is making a comeback, stimulated in part by public sector encouragement and support, following years of public policy indifference.

While not yet compelling, in the total scheme of things, public investment in private railroad infrastructure is increasingly seen as a justifiable use of taxpayer funds on the theory that anything that encourages greater use of rail, whether passenger or freight, is inherently beneficial to the general public. A ton of freight diverted from highway to rail saves energy, in most cases, and mitigates highway construction and maintenance expense, while contributing to a wide range of governmentally-sanctioned environmental enhancement and sustainability goals. Not yet given much weight in public rail investment underwriting, but no less important, is the encouragement of yet another transportation option for shippers of cargo and individual travelers as well.

This writer, long an advocate of a more inclusive and supportive public attitude towards rail, is enthusiastically supportive of public infrastructure investment, as well as appropriate operational funding of rail freight and passenger projects where such initiatives actually yield demonstrative, tangible, public benefits which would not, or could not, otherwise be delivered by the private rail industry.

The Virginia *intercity rail investment program* (terminology designed to distinguish the program from urban rail transit) has evolved from small beginnings in the 1990's, with a major funding boost in 2000, followed by the very commendable 2005 action to create the Commonwealth's on-going Rail Enhancement Fund ("REF"). Like all such worthwhile public initiatives, the REF has, in the view of this writer, had its growing pains. While millions of dollars have been committed to private railroads, it is not at all clear that the public is going to get much of a bang for its buck. Underwriting has been somewhat questionable in some instances, and transparency remains an issue to be resolved. Nevertheless, Virginia is off to a good start.

This is the first of what is intended to be an irregular series of personal commentaries by the undersigned on rail in Virginia. These missives will come to you, if you wish, from time to time, and will deal with a variety of issues, including public policy questions related to rail transportation in Virginia. The views expressed are strictly those of the undersigned, as an individual, and should not be attributed to any

organization with which I am associated. If you do, or do not, wish to receive via e-mail; or if you have comments, please let me know at railva@wrichmond.org