

Making the Most of Amtrak VA Service

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Occasionally some good comes out of Washington, even when it first appears otherwise. Back in the last days of the George W. Bush administration, the congress passed and the president signed, something known as the Passenger Rail Investment & Improvement Act of 2008 (“PRIIA”). Among the provisions is Section 209, which will soon (2013) require the several states to assume greater financial responsibility for regional Amtrak passenger service. Currently Virginia has six such trains, two of which the State already sponsors, but the financial burden of picking up the tab for the remaining four will be substantial. There has been a scramble to identify funding, but it appears that money has been scraped together to meet the State’s obligation for the next several years. A long-term funding source remains to be found for these increasingly popular and, arguably, *essential* trains.

Amtrak, and the Feds, have been very good to the Commonwealth of Virginia in the past. Until a few years ago, Virginia was relatively indifferent to what Amtrak offered in the way of service and how such service was provided. That has already begun to change, but the big challenge and opportunity is just over the horizon. At such time as the Commonwealth begins footing the bill for most, if not all, of the costs, the State will have an opportunity to be more assertive. Virginia should aggressively seize that opportunity. We are reluctant to criticize Amtrak. They have done an amazing job over the years in spite of constant uncertainty, lack of consistent political support, and absence of clear strategic direction, not to mention numerous internally-conceived organizational changes which have been costly, disruptive and sometimes counter-productive. In spite of it all, intercity rail passenger service is today a growth business in the U. S., largely due to the efforts of Amtrak and its supporters. [Rail passenger travel is growing faster than is rail freight traffic.].

But here’s the thing: Amtrak Virginia service has, overall, generally been no better or no worse than Amtrak’s system-wide service. “*Service*”, as used here, is intended to mean the totality of the business, not just train operations. Beadles’ rule No. 2 of the rail culture goes as follows: *At any given moment in time, there is a lot of good rail service and some bad rail service, be it freight or passenger. What gets fixed is usually fixed because somebody raises hell, and the problem gets the attention of the proper people. In the process of fixing one problem something else in the system, that nobody is protecting, often gets “unfixed”.* Hence, for really good service somebody needs to be on top of the situation all the time, everyday, seven day a week. Insofar as Virginia is concerned, that has not heretofore been the case. We learn by chance or crisis.

While Virginia no doubt has the best leadership team at the top of the Department of Rail and Public Transportation that it has ever had, the Dept. does not currently have in

place a system to insure that we always get full value for the scarce funds we are about to invest in Amtrak Virginia Regional Service. The new VA-sponsored service needs to be overseen -- indeed *managed* -- as would a wholly-owned business unit. # # # #