

# Needed: RAIL IM Net "On and Off Ramps"

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The evolving truck-rail intermodal ("IM") network in the U.S., currently touted by freight railroads in classy TV commercials, remains short on domestic transportation access points, as well as being light on point-to-point rail service options. Hopefully, the IM network will gradually fill out so that shippers will have more rail service options, requiring less reliance on highway transportation to get to and from rail IM terminals. To illustrate, there is currently only one place in Virginia -- Hampton Roads - where domestic freight (as opposed to international, port-related, cargo) can access the rail Net.

But here in central Virginia, there exists a near-dormant facility that could conceivably be transformed into a full-service logistics center, offering international container service via Hampton Roads, "short-sea shipping", and domestic highway-rail intermodal, plus a wide range of other value-added cargo handling services. As this is written, the future of the City-owned Port of Richmond, located several miles downstream from the falls of the James River, is uncertain. The existing complex lies hard-by I-95, with its own rail connection to CSX, and a potential direct NS connection.

The Virginia Port Authority ("VPA") has expressed interest, as well as at least one private entrepreneur. In this case, the City of Richmond owns an asset of greater strategic value to the central Virginia region than to the City itself. VPA would be a good operator, save for the fact that their traditional scope of activities does not normally include domestic transportation, except as an adjunct to international commerce.

The Richmond Port Commission has attempted, with some success, to develop domestic truck-rail cargo transfer activity, augmenting its international logistics services. The Richmond complex has the assets needed to more aggressively exploit that important activity, except interested railroads. At this time the rails seem to have other priorities.

However, it would be a fairly simple matter to gain access to the existing NS intermodal network if the City-owned port rail line were connected to NS near the Maury Street interchange on I-95. Richmond shippers and receivers of cargo, domestic and otherwise, could conceivably have a double-stack route to the Midwest and beyond. CSX is a bit more complicated, due to existing clearance issues in Richmond and Washington, but these will likely be resolved in the longer term. Virginia has previously committed funding toward D. C. rail clearance improvements for the benefit of CSX.

As the future of the Port of Richmond facility is debated, let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Too many "bridges have been burned" in the past, as result of short-term

thinking, often resulting in strategic options being foreclosed. And, please don't sell off the Port real estate to some opportunistic real estate developer with no commitment to transportation. This public river-front asset could become the much-needed truck-rail IM "ON RAMP" serving central Virginia, its businesses and industry.

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