

Petersburg, Roanoke River and DC

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Question: What connects the Roanoke River and Washington, D.C. with Petersburg? Rail, of course. So, what's the point? In 1830, business leaders in Petersburg, with financial support from the Commonwealth of Virginia, organized and built the State's first steam railroad, a bold strategic move to intercept and redirect to Petersburg the flow of commerce, primarily tobacco and cotton, then moving down the Roanoke River, of Southside VA and NC, to Albemarle Sound and up the Dismal Swamp Canal to Hampton Roads. Arguably, that initiative, coupled with other subsequent Petersburg-sponsored rail development - to City Point and Lynchburg - contributed significantly to the economic prosperity enjoyed by Petersburg for almost a century.

In more recent times, Petersburg has been in decline, but the Region, now known as the Crater Planning District, includes rapidly-developing Dinwiddie and Prince George counties. The huge federal commitment to the expansion of Fort Lee, currently underway, bodes well for the Region, including Petersburg itself. Although locally-initiated and privately-sponsored economic development is rightfully credited with much recent growth, the fact remains that central Virginia is not by any means an autonomous island of free-enterprise prosperity; it is an integral part of an urban corridor anchored on either end by the Washington Metro region and Hampton Roads, both of which are highly-dependent upon the federal government to fuel and sustain their economic vitality.

The remainder of this decade will undoubtedly hold many opportunities for central Virginia and the Crater Region, some of which will depend, for their attainment, upon improved transportation connectivity with both DC and Hampton Roads. Once again, rail promises to play an important role in Petersburg's future. Ultimately, the Region will be on the spine of the Southeast High Speed Rail Corridor, but that is years away. Much sooner, Petersburg will benefit from the establishment of through Amtrak rail passenger service linking Norfolk and DC. That could occur within two to three years, and when it starts, the Crater Region will have access to dependable same-day, round-trip rail service to and from the Washington area. Eventually, the service will inevitably expand in terms of frequencies, and we should also see some reduction in trip times. Currently described as the new "Norfolk train", the proposed State-sponsored service will actually be even more convenient to business travelers boarding and alighting at Petersburg. This should be viewed as a high-priority economic development tool for the Crater Region, a new option deserving of support and active promotion.

Meanwhile, we hear that the VA Department of Rail and Public Transportation is going to assist the Crater Region with a review and assessment of potential station locations. This is timely and appropriate, as the current Amtrak station in Ettrick is hardly the optimal location to

serve the growth areas of the Region. Someday, we will probably need a stop south of the Appomattox and another around Chester, but many rail operating issues enter into such calculations, requiring the balancing of market access against extra stops, dwell times, and line fluidity. Nevertheless it's all good news.

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