Port of Hampton Roads, and its Railroads

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No finer vantage point exists to survey the wonders of nature's creation and the mighty works of mankind than from the top floor of the Sun Trust building in downtown Norfolk. Not so visible, but critical to the success of the Port, are the rail lines supporting it. Hampton Roads once had the largest number of individual railroad companies and lines of any region of the Commonwealth, but today the Port has only two major, long-haul roads, CSX and Norfolk Southern. The predecessors of each played a critical, but now largely-forgotten, role in the development of the Port of Hampton Roads.

As result of the current world-wide economic slump, port business and freight rail traffic are severely depressed. Imports are reported to be off 35 to 40% at LA/Long Beach, CA, the largest port in the U.S. Even the hot growth streak at Hampton Roads has been broken. Container traffic at terminals owned by the Virginia Port Authority is down about 20%. All these ports look for better days to come, Hampton Roads at the expense of the southern California ports, thanks to a soon-to-be enlarged Panama Canal, and for other competitive reasons. Big economic bets are being made on the Port of Virginia.

Our two major freight railroads are critical to the commercial success of Hampton Roads because Virginia does not have the huge local and regional market that LA-Long Beach have in southern California, nor that found in close proximity to New York, the nation's No. 2 container port. Those ports are sometimes described as "must call" ports for ocean carriers plying the international trade. The Virginia port must aggressively expand its reach into the interior, and that is where the rail assets come in to the picture.

Since creation of the Commonwealth's Rail Enhancement Fund in 2005, more than 60% of available funding has gone to Hampton Roads port, or port related, rail projects. Motorists using Route 164, the connector between I-664 and the Midtown Tunnel linking Portsmouth and Norfolk, get a glimpse of some of the rail work in the highway median that is now underway. Designed to eliminate at-grade rail-street crossings in a portion of Portsmouth, as well as to provide improved rail access to the recently-opened A.P. Moller-Maersk terminal, this route will, in the future, also serve the proposed Craney Island container terminal of the Virginia Port Authority.

Some of these are rather speculative rail infrastructure investments, a portion of which are being handed over to privately-owned railroads. Prudent? Hopefully. Only time will tell! We need a base line against which to measure the accuracy of projections and claims made as part of the applications for scarce public funding. Once in service, we should also have more information on rail markets directly served, the level and quality of rail service provided, and the resulting rail market share achieved.

The Port of Hampton Roads is magnificent , and its future ought to be a bright one, including the rail-haul aspect, but the public deserves to know what it is getting for its money, with these as well as all other public rail investments. # # # #