

Ports, Ships, Trains & Tracks

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About four years ago then-Secretary of Transportation Pierce Homer made one of his infrequent appearances at the Virginia Rail Advisory Board to declare that construction of rail access to the new APM terminal in Portsmouth, and to the proposed Craney Island complex, was the highest priority rail project in the Commonwealth. Like other state politicians and bureaucrats of that time, and since, Homer presented an ambitious forecast of intermodal freight trains operating with great frequency, almost like streetcars, on and along the so-called median rail corridor of I-664 and State route 164. Fanciful visions of a doubling and tripling of rail traffic to and from Norfolk and Portsmouth container terminals were commonplace then, and are still occasionally heard.

Rail improvements then-contemplated are now substantially complete, but where are the trains? They are few and far between. Have any of you seen one? Granted, the world economy took a dramatic turn for the worse in late 2008, but the port of Hampton Roads seems not to have bounced back to the same extent as have other U. S. ports, such as LA-Long Beach, and even Savannah. We refer only to international container traffic. According to Virginia Port Authority's web-site, VPA 2010 TEU's were still down 10% below peak-year 2007. Hopefully 2011 will equal and surpass the previous high mark.

Recently, A.P. Moller-Maersk made headlines with an order for ten huge container ships, monster vessels capable of carrying 18,000 20-foot containers. Maersk says these vessels, scheduled for delivery by 2014, will steam between Asia and Northern Europe. This roughly corresponds with the planned completion of the enlarged Panama Canal. Regardless of whether such ships ever get to Hampton Roads, these events will trigger a cascading process resulting in other huge, but perhaps not-so-large, ships challenging the harbor channels of U. S. ports such as Charleston, SC and Savannah, GA. The conventional wisdom is that the Port of Virginia will benefit because of its 50-foot channel. That would be good except that our rail access to Charlotte and Atlanta, two ultimate destinations for Savannah and Charleston containers, is not what it once was.

The unfortunate loss of the most direct rail routing options in decades past could hinder the competitive position of the Port of Virginia in serving the Southeast. Some rail line segments could potentially be restored, but at great cost. Others, such as the CSX line from Suffolk to the Weldon, NC area, should be upgraded. The VA Dept. of Rail is still apparently buying the CSX story-line that CSX's National Gateway project is going to significantly benefit Hampton Roads. The point of this is not to deny CSX assistance with infrastructure funding. It is simply that we ought to put our resources where they will do the most good for Virginia. This is precisely the sort of discussion that should have been on the agenda of the Rail Advisory Board, but alas,

Governor McDonnell's operatives have just succeeded in killing that board. They call this efficiency! Perhaps it was good politics, but it is not good government! The Rail Board came at minimal cost, unlike expensive consulting firms from afar. The port-rail subject is one of several that need strategic evaluation.

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