

# Rail Improvement Stocking Stuffers

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Big-spending projects capture the attention, especially of top executives, public policy-makers, vendors, contractors, design engineers, and a multitude of consultants. But often the greatest benefit per-dollar-invested comes from small "below the radar" projects which never get in the news, nor afford a P.R. spin opportunity.

This writer's observations, incidental to a recent Amtrak rail trip from Alexandria to Richmond's Staples Mill station, serve to illustrate the point. Upon arrival of the train destined to Charleston and Savannah, the regular passenger exchange, off and on, was quickly accomplished. Then the train was moved to position a certain car to receive a wheelchair passenger. Two Amtrak employees spent fifteen minutes positioning, repositioning, hand-cranking, lowering, and hand-cranking some more, on a shabby, new-looking, but astoundingly primitive lift, all before finally placing the passenger in the vestibule of her assigned car. This spectacle involving use of pre-industrial-age manual technology, coupled with obvious lack of proficiency by the station staff, was absolutely appalling in light of on-going plans to improve speed and reliability of service.

Later the same day, upon arrival of the Newport News train at Staples Mill, it took this passenger ten minutes to disembark and reach his automobile, then another twenty (20) minutes to exit the parking lot. The larger element of time was, as regular passengers will be familiar, associated with the poorly configured parking and exit gatehouse system, exacerbated by the lack of a traffic signal on Staples Mill Road. It is so dangerous, that a right-turn (in the wrong direction) is often the safest course, adding further travel-time delay. Mind you, this was a Wednesday afternoon, not a holiday or weekend event.

Meanwhile, the State of Virginia (and soon hopefully the federal government) is spending, or planning to spend, hundreds of millions of dollars, ultimately more than a billion dollars, to shave a half-hour, or more, off the train running time. That's great, but it's portal-to-portal time that really counts with citizens using this service.

The Alexandria station situation, described above, could be fixed for a few thousand dollars, until new rail cars are procured some years hence with their own built-in electric lifts. The Staples Mill parking and exit challenge might take a million or two, even involving a strategic property acquisition transaction, but this would still be peanuts compared with what is planned to be spent on the actual railroad.

With seasonal charity, let us stipulate that everyone involved is running flat-out trying to bring more and better, faster, and more reliable train service to Virginia. But let's not forget to

ask Santa -- and DRPT -- to deposit in our collective stockings some little gifts in the ancillary-improvements category, of the type that are quicker to accomplish, much less costly, and which would yield substantial, and very tangible, benefits to all of us good boys and girls. Best wishes, and a Happy New Year!

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