

Rail In A Changing Virginia

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News of the planned closing of the huge paper mill at Franklin reminds us of how Virginia's economy is continuing to change. The former Union Camp production facility, now a victim of International Paper's capacity rationalization program, looms large as an icon of that portion of industrial America which has been in decline for many years. When a plant such as this one closes, freight railroads lose another good customer, seldom replaced in kind. Unfortunately, such closings have often taken their toll on our rail shrinking rail network, and the capacity of the rail network. Rail companies frequently respond with their own downsizing. The public loses all around.

One can think of several similar paper mills in Virginia, which over time could go the way of Franklin. Hopewell, West Point, and Covington quickly come to mind. Just for the sake of transportation contingency hypothesizing, what might be the rail impact of the closing of the mill at West Point [which we certainly hope continues to operate for many years] ? The negative business impact upon the Norfolk Southern line from Burkeville through Richmond and on to West Point would certainly be felt. Already, this well-maintained rail line is starved for freight traffic, down to basically one train per day, a mere shadow of its former Richmond & Danville and Southern Railway prominence.

Several weeks ago, we had occasion to commute to DC and back several days via Amtrak. Only a single car of local, on-line, freight was to be seen north of Fredericksburg, where once RF&P's north-end local was an overtime job. Worse yet, the freight that once was delivered by the RF&P local for Northern Virginia and DC consumption is not likely being handled by CSX intermodal (rail-highway) either. We suspect that virtually all of it is now 100% via highway. The public loses once again.

On the other hand, we watched with amazement as train load (literally!) after train load of commuters streamed out of DC those afternoons, as we observed from the station platform at Alexandria. VRE dispatches *a dozen* homebound trains each evening!

As recent as 1950, Hampton Roads and the Richmond region, each with their respective industrial economies, were larger in population than Northern Virginia. That's right, NoVA came in third! Now the giant of the Commonwealth lies largely north of the Occoquan, and continues to sprawl. Sure, most of the growth can be traced to big government, directly or indirectly, but it's a fact of life for the Commonwealth.

The State has made several attempts at developing a rail plan for the Commonwealth. The next version needs to ponder and proactively recommend the appropriate role for rail amidst all this change. We may well require a different kind of

rail network, one designed to move more people than traditional paper-mill-type rail freight. It is hoped that our new governor will give this appropriate priority by appointing a secretary of transportation with a mandate to craft a plan for development of Virginia's rail network resources that yields maximum public benefit. #####