

Redundancy: It's Necessary

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Back in the 1960's when the private U. S. rail industry was sliding towards, and sometimes over, the cliffs of financial insolvency, *redundancy* became a bad word. Those were desperate times for much of the private rail industry. To the rescue came the U.S. Congress, bringing us Amtrak, Conrail and eventually Deregulation. For their part, the railroad companies opened their doors to waves of newly-minted MBA's, who were generally very smart but most knew little about running trains and providing service. Number crunching was the thing. Anything that wasn't deemed critical in the way of fixed-plant infrastructure was considered superfluous. Suddenly, "Right-Sizing" was the objective. Even the old-timers were enlisted, and became enthused when their performance evaluation and year-end bonuses were influenced by how much physical rail infrastructure they could scrap. Much of this was absolutely necessary, essential to survival, but in the process quite a few "babies got thrown out with the bathwater"!

Now, railroad transportation in Virginia is moving back into the mainstream of the Commonwealth's multi-modal transportation options. No better example exists than the RF&P sub-division of CSX. This is the State's busiest, most complex, and arguably our most important rail line segment, one in which the State and the Federal government have invested, and are continuing to invest, millions of dollars. However, for all these public dollars, we do not yet have a dependable, reliable, year-round rail route linking DC and Richmond. Part of the problem is the result of new construction, which impacts service. A recent example was the Memorial Day weekend train cancellations and delays associated with installation of a new rail bridge in Alexandria. More of same is to be expected in the years ahead. In addition, there are serious delays associated with frequent mechanical failures of trains (VRE and Amtrak, as well as CSX) and of failures of rail-line infrastructure itself. Finally, there is unpredictable Mother Nature.

Prior to the 1960's, before the rail *network* fell apart (and, as a *network*, it has fallen apart), there were numerous routing, re-routing, and by-pass options available to ensure continuance of service in emergency. Between Alexandria and Doswell, for example, a simple phone call from one chief dispatcher to another could activate the standard, reciprocal, detour agreements between RF&P, Southern and C&O. If the RF&P route was blocked in the 83-mile segment between Alexandria and Doswell, trains could be rerouted by way of Gordonsville. That route was about 51 miles longer, and added a bit more than an hour to the trip, but it beat cancellation of the service, or delays measured in multiple hours. Sadly, this option is no longer a practical option. Although the route still exists, the tracks between Orange, Gordonsville and Doswell have been downgraded such that the ease of detouring described above has vanished.

This route could be, and it should be, restored. It would be a worthy Virginia-sponsored project to protect our public investment in vital rail service, and preserve various routing options..

The BP tragedy reminds us of the value of redundancy. This is a lesson broadly applicable, especially in rail transportation. #####