

# Thanksgiving Travel Reflections

---

by Richard L. Beadles

Volume IV, No. 22. November 28, 2012.

The obligatory local news coverage of holiday travel understandably deals with the price of gasoline and how many people AAA expects to drive automobiles, but not everybody chooses to drive, as the following photos from Richmond's Main Street and Staples Mill stations confirm. Are we seeing a trend away from the automobile?



*Internet savvy bargain hunters willing to wait outside for the bus; a lot of them! Nothing wrong with this bus, nor the people who ride it: "backpackers", mid-lifers, and seniors. Main Street Station, Richmond.*

Although Richmond's downtown intermodal transportation center still has a very long way to go to achieve the dreams of its planners, it has surprised some skeptics. Amtrak passenger arrivals and departures increase year after year, despite limited service options and numerous cancellations of trains for a variety of reasons. Recent observations of those traveling by way of Main Street Station suggest that most of them are likely to be reasonably affluent folks who are increasingly living downtown, or nearby. They probably own an automobile, but are "choice" train riders. Many are, or appear to be, university students or young professionals. It is not clear to this observer that there is much difference between Megabus© (pictured above) riders and the train passengers. Quite a different picture emerged from a visit to the local Greyhound terminal. Our observations have been limited. However, it seems clear that a significant

demand exists for alternatives to driving when service is available by rail or *luxury* bus. This seems especially so in urban corridors within mega-regions such as our I-95, I-64, 29 Piedmont, and I-81 corridors. Making Main Street Station a “real” multimodal transportation center is just as important a priority as a new Richmond ball park, and arguably higher yet than the City’s recently-approved Redskins Training Facility.



*Amtrak passengers boarding Northeast Regional train at Main Street Station two days prior to Thanksgiving. Students and other younger people with backpacks. Seniors with traditional bags. No Amtrak staff to assist. Reservations by phone or internet. Quick-Trak ticketing. No Clerks, no porters.!*

The challenge at Main Street Station is greater than just funding. While the location may be nearly ideal from a city-center standpoint, it is a very challenging one for rail construction, operations and maintenance. Everything is elevated, more complex and constrained. Major expansion of rail capacity will be costly to put in place, and costly to maintain. It is unlikely that Main Street Station will ever be made adequate to accommodate all the trains that should be Richmond’s future. However, high-yield incremental improvements can be, and should be, made to enable the routing of some additional trains to, from, and through Main Street Station. Given what the State of Virginia has spent on restoration of *Amtrak Virginia* service to Norfolk -- which we heartily applaud -- a similar amount of money, judiciously allocated to rail infrastructure capacity enhancements, could bring additional trains to center-city-Richmond. This is not an unreasonable, nor unrealistic, undertaking. A meaningful allocation should be included in the next round of State rail infrastructure funding.

However, Richmond business, community and political leaders must speak out with a unified appeal to Governor McDonnell and to the General Assembly, in exactly the same way that Norfolk did. *The capital city of the Commonwealth cannot afford to be left on the sidetrack!* If Richmond fails to speak up, as emphatically as the leadership of Hampton Roads did, it will be Richmond's own fault and the Region's loss.

At the same time, an equally critical decision must soon be made regarding improvements to Staples Mill Station, located in Henrico County. That pathetic facility, dating back to the early 1970's (older than the ballpark!) strains to handle ten times the passenger volume of Main Street. It is **RVA's** and Central Virginia's (actually "RVR" in Amtrak code; Main Street Station is "RVM") principal rail gateway, and will be for some years to come. Unfamiliar arriving passengers must think they got off at the wrong stop. *"Is this the capital city of Virginia?"*



*First train of the day from DC disembarks passengers at Staples Mill the day before Thanksgiving.*

The Henrico station is an orphan. Amtrak owns it but has no money to spend. Henrico hosts it, but has never seized the opportunity to claim it as a "signature gateway" asset. The Richmond Region was persuaded by the City to support Main Street Station -- before anybody bothered to understand the rail access challenges there. The State says "*we don't do stations*". Meanwhile, the 300-car RVR parking lot regularly overflows with 325 or more. Passengers take taxis (which don't want to accommodate them) to and from a near-by park-and-ride-lot (no courtesy van service). VDOT has only recently, and apparently reluctantly, agreed to put up a stop light. This is the highest volume Amtrak

station in Virginia. What a sad story! What a neglected opportunity! What an opportunity to spend a fraction of the dollars needed at Main Street Station and make a huge improvement, very soon. Leadership..... to whom do we look for leadership?

# # # # #