

The Practical Limits of Productivity

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For as long as anyone can remember, "productivity" has been the holy grail of industrial America. For purposes of this discussion we shall include transportation, and especially the rail industry. Who can assail the economic principle of productivity, essentially doing more with less? But advances in technologically-driven productivity seem to have some practical limits, which are seldom considered until things go wrong.

Last November the nation's air transportation system was crippled for the better part of a day by an FAA computer software malfunction in Utah, resulting in cancellation and delay of thousands of flights across the nation. Just two days earlier, a failure in Norfolk Southern's train movement signal control system reportedly impacted operations in seven states, delaying hundreds of homebound commuters on a number of VRE trains in Northern Virginia. Like financial leverage, technology can also "go south" in a hurry!

Then came the winter of 2009-2010 with several major snow storms crippling all transportation for a few days, but essentially shutting down most Amtrak train service in Virginia for a week. The duration of that service interruption was unprecedented, and some of it may have been avoidable. Major snow storms, of similar magnitude, have shut down Virginia railroads before, but never has the recovery taken so long. Trouble is that we are so darned productive that there are not enough people and equipment resources left, *on the railroad*, to promptly cope with such natural emergencies. This leaves the railroad, which used to be relatively self-sufficient, in no better position than any other business or homeowner, waiting for the VDOT snow plow and the power company to come to the rescue. Worse yet, what needs attention on the railroad may be at the end of the priority list for attention by the highway department or the power company. All too often the railroad is not a recognized part of the "grid".

There are, of course, other self-impairment rail issues, such as failure to clear the right-of-way of the trees most likely to cause trouble in snow storms, ice storms, or periods of high wind. Some of the Virginia railroads do a much better job of this sort of thing than others. Failure to adjust train lengths downward in heavy snow is another.

Then there is the natural conflict between the rail line owners' business priorities and those closer to the heart of the public; for example, Amtrak passenger service. Days after the worst of the February storms, one could fly from DC to Richmond, or drive, or ride the bus, or paddle one's boat down the Potomac, or ride a bicycle, but you could not get a train. If Virginians are serious about passenger rail, and they are demonstrating this by their utilization of

rail service and demand for more, then we have got to find a way to restore this once *all-weather* mode of transportation to a reliable dependable condition.

Private freight railroads, just as passenger advocates, are lining up for more public funding. That's fine, but evidence of greater utility and accountability must also be forthcoming. Otherwise, why bother to fund?

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