

The Trucks Did It !!!

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Our last O&C mentioned the “*truck-triggered*” collapse of the I-5 bridge in Washington state, and the “*truck-caused*” CSX derailment, explosion and fire, in Baltimore. Villains all! No, they are not! Some rouge operators are still out there, but it seems to this observer that truck-driving behavior on our highways has improved markedly in recent years (excluding owner-operator dump trucks!); no doubt due in large part to stricter safety regulations, and the cost to trucking operators of insurance and related claims for injury, death, and destruction of property.

But we do have a national truck “problem”. Our often-congested Interstates are groaning under the burden of big trucks. USDOT FHWA statistics (2007) indicate that: (a) trucks are handling four or five times more freight tonnage than rail, and (b), that truck mileage has been increasing [late 1990s data] at a slightly higher rate than total vehicle-miles traveled. Indeed, America does move by truck! There are many reasons for this, notably that 75% to 80% of freight tonnage moves less than 250 miles, where trucks excel, but rails often do not.

Here in Virginia, VDOT data (2011) for I-81 suggests that the average daily volume of big trucks probably ranges from 8,000 to 12,000, on sections of that important artery, with big trucks representing as much as 30%, or more, of total traffic count. It appears to this observer that I-81 in Virginia handles about twice the “big truck” volume of all North American railroads (rail Intermodal) combined! Meanwhile, VDOT is busy building, or preparing to build, more truck “climbing lanes” on I-81, at great expense to the general public. “Yes, the general public”, because study after study, has shown that truck taxes and fees have not kept pace with truck-related road surface maintenance costs, much less contribute to construction of additional lanes and associated bridges.

Curiously, the recent -- and very welcome -- Virginia transportation funding legislation did not address the truck cost-funding issue. The Governor says that transportation is, and should be, a broad-based (read supported by all) funding obligation.

O.K., if that be the case, then it behooves VDOT and DRPT to strive to get the best return on the public’s investment of available dollars. That, in turn, demands a closer look at Intermodal Rail Freight. Could we get more utility out of rail? Is rail a better “buy” for the public dollar in some instances? Where should the public invest, and what should the public expect from its rail freight infrastructure investments? These questions are not easily answered, but they deserve to be on the public policy transportation agenda in Virginia; as well as before the U.S. congress, assuming they

could ever agree on anything at all. We await reauthorization of U.S. surface transportation policy and funding legislation within the next year. # # # #