

UP IN SMOKE!

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The past weekend was not a good one for transportation. The Korean airliner crash at SFO, and the horrible freight train disaster at Lac-Megantic, Quebec, made international headlines. Locally, more than 260 Amtrak passengers were marooned for about 14 hours just north of Richmond on a train disabled by an extraordinarily-rare mechanical problem. There were few good options; none easy, but questions remain.

Undoubtedly there is a fascinating story behind each of these events, including the inevitable “what-ifs?” It is too soon to know all the answers, but as information comes out, we can even now draw some preliminary conclusions, few of them good.

In the San Francisco crash, it is clear to even novice aviation observers that the people who should have been intensely engaged were either too dependent upon “smart” technology, were personally distracted, or worse, and allowed control of the aircraft to get away from them at a critical moment on final approach.

The Quebec train wreck is shocking beyond words. If a freight train is properly secured, as all competent operating railroaders know how to do, it would not roll away, even if somebody shut the attached locomotive down! Anybody who has ever tied down ten or more manually-operated rail freight-car hand brakes, one by one, then released them, one by one, is not likely to easily overlook the requirement for that physically-demanding safety precaution. Either the train was not adequately secured in the first place, or somebody subsequently took steps to compromise such protection. It is about that simple. There are, however, many other complex questions yet to be answered about the physical and operational aspects of Mr. Burkhardt’s MM&A railroad.

There are reasons to be positive about the SFO accident, bad as it was. A retired NTSB official, speaking on TV, commented upon the regulatory steps taken over the years to require enhanced passenger safety features in aircraft design and construction, which he credited as factors in the amazing passenger survival statistics in this instance. Railroading, on the other hand, generally does not receive the same level of government interest and financial support. Yet we now see vividly that low-tech, “shoe-string”, railroading can pose just as serious public exposure risks. There are many marginal rail line operators in business today because large Class I railroads spun such lines off, for financial reasons, in the post-1980 wave of deregulation. Some are quite good, such as Virginia’s Buckingham Branch. Others are held together with “duct tape and baling twine”. We have nothing comparable to the MM&A in Virginia. There is more to be examined here than just this terrible accident; for example public policy and regulation.

More government regulation will surely follow, but probably with little meaningful public financial support for maintaining and sustaining “extender” rail lines such as those represented by the MM&A. Fortunately, Virginia has embraced “short line” support. There is more work to be done in Virginia, but the state is moving forward. ###