

# VA Amtrak Travel Exceeds Capacity

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by Richard L. Beadles

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Recent Thanksgiving Holiday train travel in Virginia appears to have produced some record numbers; in fact, many of the boarding and detraining crowds far exceeded station waiting area and shelter capacity. Parking lots were overwhelmed, creating congestion, fraying nerves and constraining ingress and egress.

Among Virginia's eighteen (18) Amtrak train-served stations, it appears that Alexandria, Charlottesville, Lynchburg, the two Richmond stations, Williamsburg and Newport News may have set new records. We shall have to await receipt of the official numbers. Of one thing we are certain, some of the boarding and detraining crowds were truly impressive: For example, about 375 passengers boarded the morning northbound regional train at Charlottesville on the day before Thanksgiving. With limited parking and station shelter, anytime an "on" or "off" crowd exceeds 100 passengers at any of these stations, parking and passenger shelter capacity constraints are being reached. At the Staples Mill station in Richmond, where legal parking is only about 250 autos, there were more than twenty such occasions. Charlottesville, with perhaps even less capacity, witnessed about one-dozen such events. Newport News, with a tiny station and limited parking, saw more than fifteen such occasions over the course of the holiday when crowds of greater-than-100 passengers boarded or alighted.

While it is laudable to spend money on rail line capacity, designed to speed up and ensure more reliable train service, commensurate station, parking, and access improvements are also very much needed. This situation will only grow worse, as more Virginians every year take to the trains. Amtrak, which built the Staples Mill station in the mid-1970's, will not construct any more stations in Virginia. They should not do so even if they had the money. Moreover, in their current austerity mode, Congress is going to see to it that they don't. Rail passenger stations, related parking, and access -- including transit - must be a local municipal, or regional, responsibility in the future.

Charlottesville, Lynchburg, Richmond and Newport News, and/or the regions in which they are located, have spent big bucks on airport terminal facilities. Now it is time they faced up to their rail passenger terminal needs, to meet both short-term and future requirements. Henrico County, in which Staples Mill is located, needs to address that issue without delay. Norfolk, basking in the apparent success of the new Tide light rail line, is stepping up to their responsibility in preparation for re-establishment of Amtrak train service in the near future. How adequate that facility will be, remains to be seen.

Rail passenger service in Virginia becomes more mainstream, and more essential, with each passing year. Richmond airport boardings continue to be depressed, while rail is up. Something

is going on, something that public policy makers and infrastructure planners would not have expected just a few years ago. It's time to take stock and to react accordingly. If you have a newly-elected representative, urge them to look into this phenomenon. For the time being, have someone drop you off at the train station.

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