

VA HSR - Fog, Bluster & Posturing?

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Earlier this month in-state media sources reported that Virginia public transportation officials had elected not to further pursue potentially-available high-speed rail ("HSR") funds. Shortly after, national business media sources quoted the CEO of CSX as having said he wanted nothing to do with it, regardless. As of this writing, nothing has been officially heard from U. S. transportation officials about the Virginia decision, but we suspect they were surprised and disappointed. The real story requires a reading of the blank spaces between the lines. Frankly, this sounds like a case involving unfortunate rigidity of positions, inadequate preparation, a corporate temper tantrum, and perhaps raw politics. Unless resolved, the public will be the big loser. Development of the DC-Richmond rail corridor is an essential prerequisite to virtually all 21st century rail progress in the urban corridors of Virginia and in the Piedmont of North Carolina.

This is not just about "high speed rail". It starts with improving existing rail infrastructure and service -- both passenger and freight -- which, as a matter of principle, public officials have largely agreed to underwrite. Nobody in their right mind is expecting CSX to operate true HSR on existing tracks. Nobody is expecting CSX to incur the operating losses often attributed to rail passenger services. In the past, the problem has simply been one of attempting to obtain some reasonable assurances from CSX that public investment on their rail line would yield measurable improvement in *conventional* rail service, and thus public benefit -- the very least we should expect.

As for the feds, the state bureaucrats, and their political bosses: Neither the federal nor the state camp was ready to expeditiously implement the ambitious Obama rail initiative, which by the way was not, and is not, exclusively one that requires the launch of TGV-type HSR service in the next several years. There had never before been such a rail program orchestrated from D.C. As we understand it, the so-called Obama rail plan would, at best, move us forward, layer by layer, step by step. One could say that it is designed to enable the U.S. to *begin* to catch up with the rest of the modern world.

While much progress has been made in Virginia over the past decade, dating back to Governor Jim Gilmore's 1999-2000 effort to increase rail infrastructure funding and to collaborate with Amtrak in the DC-RIC corridor, we have had a herky-jerky existence. Our every-four-year revolving door gubernatorial administrations have brought a sizable string of different leaders into the rail planning group, some quite competent, some only marginally so. Until some future governor and legislature organizes, staffs, and funds Virginia's rail program for success, we are likely to continue to be disappointed.

Finally, some "R's" apparently dislike President Obama so much that they are against anything he proposes, particularly his HSR program, which has become a favored target. New governors in Virginia seem to immediately begin to cast eyes upon national office. Why then would our incumbent governor want to be associated with anything Obama? If that's the case, it would be a shame!

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