

VRE: Two Decades of Growth

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Many would say that the greatest success story in Virginia railroading over the past two decades has been the emergence of Virginia Railway Express (“VRE”), the “developed-from-scratch”, publicly-owned, funded, and operated commuter railroad serving the Northern Virginia region and the District on two lines, one originating at Manassas, the other currently at Fredericksburg. From an encouraging start in 1992, ridership (counting people moved in, and another count out) has grown from nothing to the point where five-million riders annually may soon be the norm. Where will it stop?

As one who participated in early feasibility studies dating back to the 1960s, on behalf of the old RF&P Railroad, it is fair to say that we thought the proponents were misguided. That’s the polite version! We had just rid ourselves of the financial burden of operating the last of our money-losing commuter trains (No’s 10 and 29). I-95 was still relatively uncongested, and the whole idea seemed to be a train buff’s fantasy. Worst of all, we knew from experience that the operation of commuter trains can be the most voracious consumer of track capacity, during the hours they operate. Nevertheless, little by little our company inched closer to acceptance of the justification for what was to become VRE. We also gained confidence in the sustainability of public funding to protect the host railroad from getting stuck with providing such service. Liability protection and insurance was a deal-breaking issue until creatively resolved by legislation enacted in Richmond and Washington. But the capacity issue remained.

Capacity issues never went away. VRE started with a significant deficit in rail line capacity during peak periods. The importance of RF&P’s original concession on capacity was critical to getting VRE started, a point never fully understood nor recognized by jurisdictions benefitting from VRE service. Much of the public money expended to date in the DC-RIC rail corridor by the State of Virginia, and by the Feds, has gone to mitigate that original capacity deficit. On occasion Richmond and Hampton Roads Amtrak-Virginia Regional trains get stuck behind VRE trains making multiple stops. This can also entrap CSX freight trains. The challenge of coordinating the three basic services – CSX freight, Amtrak, and VRE -- will only get more costly to resolve as all three services grow in the future. Attaining and maintaining a fair balance in benefits vs. cost responsibility will be an on-going challenge.

We can empathize with State and Federal funders of VRE, as well as of Amtrak services, (which includes all Virginia taxpayers, in one way or another). CSX -- successor to RF&P -- has both the rights and muscle to protect its own interest, but they too deserve the public’s gratitude.

It is gratifying to see the progress that has been made in rail development and activity on the old “RF&P”. Prudent CSX stewardship of the Corridor, together with adequate public funding for critical infrastructure improvements required for public benefit, should enable all rail services to coexist in the years ahead. # # # #