

# DRPT's DRAFT Virginia Rail Plan

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Currently out for public review and comment is the latest State Rail Plan produced by the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation. If you are up to the task (170 pages), take a look at: <http://www.drpt.virginia.gov/activities/files/00%20-%20DRAFT%20VSRP.pdf>

This latest version of a Virginia Rail Plan is a spectacular achievement, reflecting great credit upon DRPT. Yet upon careful review, it lacks some very important information and, more disappointingly, the draft plan lacks a well-defined vision of just what rail in Virginia is anticipated to look like and accomplish, for and on behalf of the citizen taxpayers of the Commonwealth, in the out-years, e.g. 2040 and beyond. A “safe, efficient, seamless system of transportation, providing choices” is a great concept, but where’s the beef? Can intercity rail passenger services, sponsored by the State, make any quantifiable, positive, impact upon highway congestion? If so, how will future citizens know whether it did or did not? And how will they know whether or not it was worth it, in financial terms? Is rail freight a realistic alternative to more and more truck-demand infrastructure, such as those climbing lanes on I-81? Where is the evidence, such as specific numbers to confirm a positive trend resulting from the modest investments made by the public sector in private rail freight infrastructure over the past eight years? The Heartland Corridor was first; it ought to be possible to provide an update by now.

As a life-long rail advocate, albeit one with a desire to have the facts, and to be guided by the reality of whatever such facts support, this writer suspects that fundamental Virginia transportation policy questions remain to be confronted by future governors, the legislature and secretaries of transportation before DRPT will be able to produce a State Rail Plan that appropriately responds to future mobility and transport requirements of the Commonwealth.

The fact is that Virginia still lacks an optimal model for transportation over the next fifty years, a model—however difficult to design and perfect—that proposes to allocate *public* transportation resources (read as tax dollars) among the numerous transportation modal options, based upon all of the direct and indirect inputs: social, commercial, financial, environmental and otherwise. There is no such thing as an unconstrained “free market” in transportation! It is largely a function of government policy, direct as well as indirect, including unintended consequences of past public policy decisions. For the most part, we are stuck with simply trying to respond to, accommodate, and unwittingly perpetuate that which we already have in place based upon individual and commercial propensities to use whatever transportation infrastructure that the public sector provides. Individuals and businesses default to that which appears to be the most convenient, and least costly, to THEM (notwithstanding the fact that the ultimate cost to society may be quiet exorbitant, and perhaps even unsustainable, e.g. 80,000+single-occupant autos on I-95 and 10,000+ long-haul tractor-trailer rigs on I-81, both on an average day).

Returning to the DRAFT Plan mentioned at the beginning of this piece: It would be helpful to see more data, historical as well as projections, concerning the **\$ 6.9 billion** that DRPT would like to spend over the next thirty years. Just what can the public expect to get for its money, who actually “gets it”, who winds up the owner and the operator, who pays for it and

how; what are the projected public benefits, etc.? Absent a convincing case “for”, we are left to wonder, is it worth it? Absent a stronger and more compelling presentation of “the case for”, the appealing long-term dreams of DRPT are at risk of being dashed upon the rocks of public policy battles. Take a look, and let DRPT know what you think of their Plan. # # # #