

VA's RAIL Policy: Then, Now & Future

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For about 100 years, roughly from the 1870's to the 1970's, the Commonwealth of Virginia -- like most states -- largely ignored its railroads, or worst yet, pummeled them with punitive legislation, harsh regulatory action and aggressive taxation, to the extent that private railroads tended to view government, at all levels, as a serious impediment to conducting their transportation business. Any citizen over fifty years of age, with recall of modern business history, will remember that the private U. S. railroad industry was in a terrible state of financial distress by the late 1960's. The consensus view of many at that time was that, with few exceptions, rail was *passee*; that super highways and jet aviation would send rail to the dust bin of transportation history. A few policy makers in the U. S. congress felt otherwise, resulting in the creation of Amtrak, Conrail and, at the mega-regional levels of government, the creation of public commuter rail operations in places such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago.

With the exception of former Governor Linwood Holton, nobody in Virginia government appeared to foresee much role for passenger rail. Holton asked then U.S. Secretary of transportation John Volpe to study the potential for developing the DC-Richmond corridor for improved passenger rail service. The 1960's also witnessed the first visionary stirrings of the concept that in 1990-91 would become Virginia Rail Express, Northern Virginia's surprisingly-successful commuter rail operation. Former Governor Gerald Baliles, among others, was supportive of that initiative. In the year 2000, Governor Jim Gilmore and General Assembly leaders authorized the first big money to begin to improve DC-Richmond rail infrastructure. In 2005, then-Governor Mark Warner took a significant step forward with his sponsorship of the Rail Enhancement Fund, primarily for freight rail. His successor, Tim Kaine, boldly launched Virginia's first two state-sponsored regional passenger trains, including the highly-successfully Lynchburg train. Virginia has since invested big bucks in the NS Heartland and Crescent Corridors. Currently, under Governor McDonnell, the Petersburg-Suffolk corridor is being improved, with Amtrak VA regional service to Norfolk starting soon. Millions of Virginia public dollars have been invested in rail infrastructure to serve the Port of Hampton Roads, including most recently, in the CSX National Gateway project.

What a turnaround by the Commonwealth and its political leaders, and what a *bi-partisan* effort this has been! However, much of what has been done to develop rail -- all commendable -- has been project-specific, and not undertaken with the benefit of a comprehensive set of policies, nor even a long-term vision of a strategic plan for VA rail.

This is not the first time that the Commonwealth has taken the plunge into rail investment. The first was 1830-1861, which ended badly for the citizens of Virginia; not exclusively due to the Civil War. That's another instructive story which we will revisit in

future editions of series. We owe it to ourselves, and to future generations, to get it right this time. But, one thing has been settled: *Rail is back in Virginia's future!* #####