

Virginia's Remarkable Rail Turnaround

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Twenty four years ago, in 1986, intercity rail (both passenger and freight) was largely *missing-in-action* when the highly-touted Baliles transportation initiative rolled out of Capitol Square. Except for the Washington Metro, the then-still-conceptual Virginia Railway Express commuter rail dream, and a few other minor rail assistance programs, the Commonwealth of Virginia had no vision for the future role of rail in our state. Such was not entirely a failure of public transportation policy. The Class I freight rails were still obsessed with shrinking their way into prosperity. The year 1986 was noteworthy, in that regard, because of two very unfortunate CSX line abandonments, the former Seaboard line along the I-85 corridor from Petersburg to North Carolina, and the most direct link between Richmond and South Hampton Roads, a short but vital segment in Colonial Heights and Petersburg. The loss of both routes is now regretted, and will be costly to replicate. Also, Amtrak was under constant threat of being dissolved by occupants of the White House, regardless of party affiliation.

What a difference a quarter century has made. Ridership on VRE is at an all-time high. Amtrak is setting new ridership records in Virginia and across the nation, up 13.5% in March. Norfolk Southern is about to launch its new, more direct, Heartland Corridor intermodal freight service between the Port of Virginia and the Midwest, and is hard at work on their Crescent Corridor intermodal project. Even CSX, always a bit slow to catch on in Virginia, is trying to get its National Gateway project going. What happened? The world changed. Energy, the environment, and diminished highway capacity options have altered the transportation landscape.

But something else changed as well. Bi-partisan political leadership in Virginia stepped up to the challenge and opportunity, starting with the Transportation Act of 2000, which provided the first shot of big time State money for rail infrastructure in the DC-Richmond corridor, followed by the 2005 enactment of something known as the Rail Enhancement Fund, or "REF". With meaningful public money to be had, the traditional "leave-us alone" private rail corporate mentality has now morphed into an active group of grant application "clients". They're lining up at the public window, and rail infrastructure construction is coming alive again in Virginia.

Now, five years after creation of the REF, and its shadow Rail Advisory Board "RAB", it is time to take stock of how effectively we are using our scarce public financial resources, what we are getting for our investment, and just where public policy-makers want to go with all of this? To that end, the Virginia Rail Policy Institute has just completed, and delivered to the director of the Department of Rail, and others, a critique on the effectiveness of the REF and RAB. It is worth reading if you are interested in the future of rail transportation in the Commonwealth. The report can be found on the VRPI website. Click [here](#)! We owe it to

Virginians to get the most transportation benefit for their public investment in all modes of transport, including rail. Take a look. Vote your proxy through the public comment process.

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