

# Virginia's Stake in the Northeast Rail Corridor

---

By Richard L. Beadles

Volume III, No. 11. June 14, 2011

Let's hope Virginia transportation officials, and our elected representatives on Capitol Hill, are paying attention, and considering the possible consequences -- some perhaps positive and many others very negative -- associated with House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman John L. Mica's (R. Florida) proposal to strip Amtrak of its exclusive intercity passenger service franchise on, and its current physical control of, the Northeast Rail Corridor ("NEC") between Washington and Boston.

Mica, a long-time Amtrak critic, who is fond of describing the National Rail Passenger Corporation as a "Soviet-style" ward of the U. S. federal government, does not inspire confidence, nor credibility, in his assessment of Amtrak, nor - to the extent we understand it - by his plan for "privatizing" passenger rail in the Northeast. From the point of view of many informed Virginians, Mica's "privatization" scheme would likely have some very unsatisfactory ramifications for rail development south of the Potomac.

For starters, all current passenger rail service operating in Virginia, as well as much commuter rail (which is the dominant user of NEC), are to varying degrees dependent upon NEC infrastructure. Obviously, this is particularly true with respect to Amtrak long-distance, regional, and state-sponsored services. The so-called "freight railroads" over which Amtrak operates outside the NEC have shown no enthusiasm whatsoever for a proliferation of private passenger train operators on their lines. Clearly, this could change if the financial rewards perception changed from *negative* to *positive*. Mica and company are in no position to award franchises for intercity passenger train operation outside the NEC. What happens if Amtrak is shut out of the NEC? How would Virginia-sponsored service from Boston to Richmond, Lynchburg and Norfolk be impacted?

On the other hand, the NEC has huge infrastructure investment needs, including replacement of post-Civil War-era tunnels in Baltimore and one-hundred-year-old tunnels under the Hudson in New York. Is Mica going to have the U.S. Treasury, through D.O.T., promptly fund replacements, etc.? If the Mica scheme is to produce a European-type high speed rail line linking D.C., N.Y. and Boston, and then auction off franchises at below-cost (the highway and aviation model), then many operators could do better than Amtrak does today. In fact, Amtrak itself could do much better under that scenario.

Clearly, we do not yet know enough about what is proposed, nor what is possible, but the proposition bears watching, and official intervention in the legislative process by the Commonwealth of Virginia, its legislative representatives, and others is warranted.

It is often easier to find fault than to fix transportation challenges. Pragmatism, rather than ideology, is usually more productive. Keep an eye on Mica and other Amtrak critics. Usually, they are not very well informed. Virginia has too much to lose to sleep past this *Approach* signal. There may be a *STOP* signal coming up!

(c) copyright 2010 Richard L. Beadles

---