Weak Links in Virginia Transportation System

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Recent news stories relating to transportation accidents have included the Metro North (commuter rail) train collision in Bridgeport, Conn., which put the New York City-New Haven (and Boston) Amtrak route out of service for several days, followed by the truck-triggered I-5 bridge collapse at Mount Vernon, Washington, which will seriously constrict highway traffic flow north of Seattle for several weeks, or more. Closer to home was the truck-caused CSX freight train derailment, explosion and fire, in the Baltimore area, tying up that route for several days. Fortunately, none of these accidents occurred in Virginia, but we are also vulnerable.

As a youthful follower of WW II news, and of its subsequent history, I was always intrigued by the German railway system's ability to continue functioning right up until the end of the war. Subsequently, I have had occasion to inquire of some who were there as part of the U.S. Army railway reconstruction units which followed the infantry as Allied forces advanced toward Berlin. How could this have been, I asked? The answer: For one thing, there was always another way around the bombed out line. Look at a rail map of Berlin, then as now. There are more routing options for rail in, out and around Berlin than there are *major* highway routes in, out and around Washington, D.C. !

The interstate highway system in Virginia has many vulnerable spots, not just in Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads. Anyone familiar with Virginia's rail routes could quickly identify a half-dozen critical bridges which, if taken out, would essentially render rail transportation in Virginia paralyzed for perhaps months, or even longer.

It goes without saying that redundancy in design of bridges is essential. But some degree of redundancy in system functionality is also much to be desired, for reasons which should be obvious. Yet, for political reasons in the public sector, and for financial reasons in the private sector, we continue to cut the cloth on the skimpy side. Let's hope that practice never bites us as hard as it might.

While a grand solution seems beyond our reach at the moment, there are opportunities, from time to time, that seem to elude us. While there have been some good examples of forward-thinking in transportation corridor planning, e.g. Dulles access corridor, and the I-664 median rail project in Hampton Roads, we continue to allow opportunities to slip through our fingers. The most recent was the planned Route 460 highway project, which should have included a right-of-way plan for rail as well (even if not constructed for decades). Then, there is the long-talked-about "Western Bypass" in Northern Virginia, which will one day be built. It too should have a rail component.

Construction is costly, but good planning is relatively inexpensive. While it is fashionable to deride the "socialistic central planning" of our European cousins, we can learn a lot from them, and we should.

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