

BUILDING OUT RAIL CAPACITY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Compelling energy, economic, and environmental benefits flow from maximum use of rail to move both people and goods. Virginia has made significant progress on passenger rail in recent years, but funding is needed to improve the speed, frequency, and reliability of service; extend service to new areas; modernize stations; and improve multimodal connections to them. There needs to be increased attention to freight railroads' needs as well. Rail is pivotal to helping us reach our decarbonization goals. Electrification of mainlines, strategies to switch more trucks to rail, and preservation of abandoned rail corridors for future growth are all vital planning objectives.

CHALLENGE

Virginia's investments between 2008 and 2019 in improving and expanding passenger rail service resulted in a 31% increase in passenger rail service, a 65% increase in ridership, and expanded daily Amtrak Regional service to 2.5 million more Virginians.¹ In 2019, our Regional trains carried over 924,000 passengers – taking over 187 million passenger miles off our roads, reducing fuel consumption by nearly 3.9 million gallons, and preventing the release of 35,000 metric tons of CO2 pollution.²

The passenger experience needs continued improvement. Train travel-times and reliability are less than ideal, many stations need repair and updating, and transit connections between rail stations and activity centers are often lacking.

Additional service is needed as well. Our passenger rail network is primarily set up for north-south travel and there is very limited east-west service. Train travel is less polluting and more energy efficient than driving. Electrifying rail in Virginia would be much cleaner, but cost and

other barriers have blocked this so far.

In terms of freight, a central challenge is that Class One railroads are privately owned and driven by a focus on maximizing returns to shareholders rather than the public interest. Recently, the freight railroads have focused on downsizing and disinvesting their assets and workforce, leaving our roadways and truckers to take on the additional freight movement.

SOLUTION

Since December 2019, the state has announced agreements with CSX and with Norfolk Southern to purchase a total of 412 miles of railroad right-of-way and 251 miles of railroad trackage, as well as construct 50 miles of new railroad trackage and double railroad capacity between Washington, DC and Virginia by expanding the Potomac River railroad crossing.³ These agreements, called the Transforming Rail in Virginia program (TRVA), will allow six new roundtrip Amtrak Regional trains, extension of service from Roanoke to Christiansburg, and five more Virginia Railway Express trains on the Fredericksburg line (including weekend service). Additionally, in 2020 the Virginia General Assembly created the Virginia Passenger Rail Authority (VPRA) to own, maintain, implement, and operate the Commonwealth's passenger rail network.

The Transforming Rail in Virginia program will reduce the travel time of our trains and increase their reliability.

Funding for the TRVA program is essential. In addition to increasing service, the projects identified in the TRVA should reduce the travel time of our trains and increase their reliability. Implementation of these and other projects also depends on continuing to set up the VPRA.

The state is currently conducting a feasibility study for the return of direct east-west passenger rail service along the Commonwealth Corridor as part of their 2022 Virginia Rail Plan; and they are updating their station modernization and improvement plan.

The TRVA agreements will allow for future electrification of our rail service when the DC-Richmond-North Carolina corridor is fully built out. We should look for opportunities such as dual-mode engines and other technologies that will allow the state to begin constructing electrified portions of our rail corridors.

We should also look at incentives for moving freight from trucks to tracks while also being prepared for additional abandonments of rail lines by the Class One railroads and ensure the Commonwealth is ready to purchase them for future passenger and/or freight rail service. Elected representatives should be vigilant for opportunities to make freight railroads more responsive and responsible to public interest concerns.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Protect rail funding and follow through on the Transforming Rail program and complete the Commonwealth Corridor feasibility study of returning east-west (New River Valley-Charlottesville-Richmond-Hampton Roads) passenger rail service across the state.

Modernize rail stations and provide affordable and reliable multimodal connections between stations and activity centers.

Authorize a state study of the opportunities to expedite the electrification of our rail corridors.

Fund a rigorous study of the economic and environmental life-cycle costs and benefits of adding new freight capacity on rail versus on the highway in the I-81 Corridor.

Protect any potentially abandoned rail corridors through public purchase for future service and/or rails with trails.

Virginia's investments in improving and expanding passenger rail service expanded Amtrak Regional to 2.5 million more Virginians.

Image credit: Doug Riddell

