

EXPANDING RAIL

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Compelling energy, economic, and environmental benefits flow from maximizing the use of rail to move both people and goods. Virginia has made significant progress on passenger rail in recent years, but increased 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. Redirecting freight traffic from roads to rail is also important to reduce emissions and congestion, and steps needed include improving freight rail in the I-81 corridor and preserving abandoned rail corridors for future freight and passenger service. In addition, all passenger and freight trains and lines should be electrified, or other steps taken to eliminate emissions.

CHALLENGE

Virginia's efforts between 2008 and 2019 to improve and expand passenger rail service resulted in a 31% increase in 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 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

Passenger rail needs continued investment to achieve even greater impacts. Train travel-times and reliability often are less than ideal, many stations need repair and updating, and transit connections between rail stations and activity centers are frequently limited or lacking altogether.

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, especially connecting Hampton Roads and Southwest Virginia. Train travel is far less polluting and more energy efficient than driving. Electrifying rail in Virginia would be that 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 short-term returns to shareholders rather than the public interest. Recently, freight railroad companies have focused on downsizing and disinvesting their assets and workforce, leaving our roadways and truckers to handle the additional freight movement.

SOLUTION

Since December 2019, the state has announced and finalized agreements with CSX and Norfolk Southern to purchase 412 miles of railroad right-of-way and 251 miles of track, as well as to construct 50 miles of new railroad track, thus doubling the rail capacity between Washington, D.C. and Virginia by expanding the Long Bridge over the Potomac River.³ These agreements, which are core parts of the Transforming Rail in Virginia program (TRVA), will allow

six new roundtrip Amtrak Regional trains, the 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 General Assembly created the Virginia Passenger Rail Authority (VPRA) to own, maintain, implement, and operate the Commonwealth's passenger rail network.

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

The state has completed 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. We should look for opportunities such as dual-mode engines, battery electric 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 rail while also being prepared for additional abandonments of rail lines by the Class One railroads and ensuring the Commonwealth is ready to purchase them for future passenger and/or freight rail service. We should explore all opportunities to make freight railroads more responsive and responsible to public interest concerns.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Protect rail funding and implement the Transforming Rail in Virginia program.

Secure the inclusion of the Commonwealth Corridor (New River Valley - Charlottesville - Richmond - Hampton Roads) study into the Virginia Statewide Rail Plan.

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

Authorize a state study of opportunities to expedite the transition to zero-emissions trains and infrastructure.

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

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