

EXPANDING RAIL

Danny Plaughter // Virginians for High Speed Rail // danny@vhsr.com
Trip Pollard // Southern Environmental Law Center // tpollard@selcva.org

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 places; modernize stations, further reduce their environmental impact, and improve multimodal connections to them. It is also important to redirect freight traffic from roads to rail to reduce pollution and congestion, preserve abandoned rail corridors for future freight and passenger service, and support the transition to zero-emission trains.

CHALLENGE

Virginia's efforts since 2008 to improve and expand passenger rail service resulted in a 55% increase in service, a doubling of ridership, and expanded daily service to 2.5 million more Virginians.¹ Recent ridership is setting new records, with our Regionals projected to carry 1.2 million passengers this year alone² – avoiding an estimated 282.9 million passenger miles on our roads, reducing fuel consumption by about 6 million gallons, and preventing the release of 53,000 metric tons of carbon pollution.³

Passenger rail needs continued investment to achieve even greater impacts. Train travel times and reliability need to be improved, 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 next to no east-west service. A 4.5 hour drive between Norfolk and Roanoke takes 16 hours by train; an east-west rail connection would reduce the number of cars on both I-64 and I-81.

And although train travel is far less polluting and 46% more energy efficient than driving, electrifying rail in Virginia—which is already in place from Washington, DC north—would be much cleaner.⁴ New state corridors should be built to accommodate zero-emission technologies.

Further, a central challenge for freight rail is that the major railroad corporations are focused on downsizing their assets and workforce to maximize short-term returns to shareholders, resulting in longer trains and more frequent breakdowns.

SOLUTION

Since December 2019, the state has announced and finalized agreements with CSX and Norfolk Southern to purchase 663 miles of railroad right-of-way and track, construct 50 miles of new railroad track, and double the rail capacity between DC and Virginia. 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). Funding for the TRVA program is essential to increase service, reduce travel times, and increase the reliability of our trains.

To restore direct east-west passenger rail service between Hampton Roads and Roanoke, the state has submitted the Commonwealth Corridor to the Federal Railroad Administration's (FRA) Corridor Identification Program to place it in the federal project pipeline. The state is also updating its station modernization and improvement plan accordingly.

The TRVA agreements will allow for future phased electrification of our rail service when the DC-Richmond-Raleigh corridor is fully built out. We should look for opportunities and technologies that will allow the state to begin to decarbonize our rail corridors sooner.

We should also look at incentives for moving freight from trucks to rail while being prepared for abandonments of rail lines by the Class One railroads and ensuring the Commonwealth is ready to railbank such corridors for future use. Lastly, we should explore opportunities to make freight railroads more responsive to public interest concerns—including the need to decarbonize their train fleets.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Protect and increase rail funding to support the implementation of the Transforming Rail in Virginia program.

Support the Commonwealth Corridor's (New River Valley - Charlottesville - Richmond - Hampton Roads) inclusion in the FRA Corridor Identification Program.

Fund rail station modernization and provide multimodal connections between stations and activity centers.

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

Fund a study of the economic and environmental life-cycle costs and benefits of adding new freight capacity on rail vs. roadways.

Protect any potentially abandoned rail corridors through public purchase and railbanking for future use.