

EXPANDING RAIL

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WHY IT MATTERS

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. Virginia's efforts to improve and expand passenger rail service resulted in a 74% increase in service, a 135% increase in ridership, and expanded daily Amtrak Regional service to 2.5 million more Virginians.¹ Recent ridership on our Regional trains is setting new records, with our Regional's projected to carry nearly 1.4 million passengers this year²—avoiding an estimated 328 million passenger miles on our roads, reducing fuel consumption by about 7 million gallons, and preventing the release of 61,000 metric tons of carbon pollution.³

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Since December 2019, the state has finalized agreements with CSX and Norfolk Southern to purchase a total of 412 miles of railroad right-of-way and 251 miles of railroad track, as well as construct 50 miles of new railroad track and double the rail capacity between Washington, DC and Virginia by expanding the Potomac River railroad crossing. These agreements are core parts of the Transforming Rail in Virginia program (TRVA) which is a multi-corridor, multi-year, multi-phase passenger rail development program. These agreements will allow six new roundtrip Amtrak Regional trains, an extension of service from Roanoke to Christiansburg, and five more Virginia Railway Express trains on the Fredericksburg line (including weekend service). In addition to the increased service, these projects should reduce travel time and increase the reliability of our trains.

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

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 which they have submitted to the Federal Railroad Administration's (FRA) Corridor Identification Program, and which has been accepted, to place it in the federal project pipeline, and they are also updating their station modernization and improvement plan.

OPPORTUNITIES

Passenger rail needs continued investment to achieve even greater benefits. 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 very limited east-west service.

And although train travel is far less polluting and more energy efficient than driving, electrifying rail in Virginia—which is already in place from Washington, DC north—would be much cleaner and save passengers' time. To date, however, cost and other barriers have blocked this.

As for freight rail, a central challenge is that the major railroads are privately owned and focus on maximizing short-term returns to shareholders rather than the public interest. Recently, railroad companies have concentrated on downsizing and disinvesting their assets and workforce, resulting in longer freight trains and more frequent breakdowns.

It is also important to redirect freight traffic from roads to rail to reduce pollution and congestion and support the transition to zero-emission trains. We should look at incentives for moving freight from trucks to rail while being prepared for abandonments of rail lines by the major freight railroads (CSX/NS) and ensuring the Commonwealth is ready to purchase them for future passenger and/or freight rail service. And we should explore opportunities to make freight railroads more responsive to public interest concerns—including the need to decarbonize their train fleets.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

Virginia's Amtrak ridership is growing, breaking 2 million passengers for the first time in FY 2023, and we need to continue to support our Virginia-supported Amtrak trains.

The success of Virginia's rail system depends on consistent and increased funding and the advancement of the Transforming Rail in Virginia program.

Our Amtrak trains are much more environmentally friendly than other modes of travel but transitioning to zero-emissions technologies would be much cleaner and save passengers' time.