

EXPANDING RAIL

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WHY IT MATTERS

Compelling energy, economic, health, and environmental benefits flow from maximizing the use of rail to move both people and goods. Virginia has made significant progress in expanding and improving passenger rail in recent years, which has resulted in a 74% increase in service, a 157% increase in ridership, and expanded daily Amtrak Regional service to 2.5 million more Virginians.¹ Recent ridership on our Amtrak trains is setting new records, with our trains carrying nearly 2.4 million passengers this year.² As a result, rail has diverted an estimated 704 million passenger miles on our roads, reducing fuel consumption by about 14.8 million gallons, and preventing the release of 132,000 metric tons of carbon pollution.³

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Since December 2019, Virginia 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.⁴ 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 round-trip 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 completed. Still, further research could determine additional opportunities and technologies to allow decarbonization of our rail corridors before the completion of the corridor.

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 State Rail Plan which was submitted to the Federal Railroad Administration's (FRA) Corridor Identification Program. This proposal was placed in the federal project pipeline.

Further, the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transit (DRPT) is updating its station modernization and improvement plan, which could call for long-overdue upgrades to passenger rail stations in

the Commonwealth.

OPPORTUNITIES

Passenger rail needs continued and increased 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 along the Northeast Corridor—is much cleaner and saves passengers' time. To date, however, cost and other barriers have blocked this.

For freight rail, a central challenge is that the major railroads are privately owned and focus on maximizing short-term returns to shareholders, which conflicts with 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. Combined, these short-term-focused strategies result in longer wait times for passenger trains.

Redirecting freight traffic from roads to rail would reduce pollution and congestion and support the transition to zero-emission trains. We could look at incentives for moving freight from trucks to rail while being prepared for the abandonment of rail lines by the major freight railroads and ensuring the Commonwealth is ready to purchase abandoned rail lines for future passenger and/or freight rail service. We could also explore opportunities to make freight railroads more responsive to public interest concerns, including the need to decarbonize their train fleets.

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TOP TAKEAWAYS

Virginia's Amtrak ridership is growing and setting new records, breaking 2 million passengers for the first time in FY 2023, and we need to continue to fund Virginia-supported Amtrak trains to further reduce fuel use and carbon emissions.

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 driving, but transitioning to more zero-emission technologies would be much cleaner and save passengers' time.

ENDNOTES

1. Calculations based on data from Amtrak and US Census.
2. *Virginia State Fact Sheet*. (May 30, 2025). Amtrak. <https://www.amtrak.com/content/dam/projects/dotcom/english/public/documents/corporate/statefactsheets/VIRGINIA24.pdf>
3. Calculations based on data from the US EPA, US Dept. of Energy, US Dept. of Transportation, and Amtrak
4. *Transforming Rail*. (2025). Virginia Passenger Rail Authority. <https://vapassengerrailauthority.org/transformingrail/>