

TRANSFORMING PASSENGER RAIL

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WHY IT MATTERS

Expanding the use of rail to move both people and goods delivers significant energy, economic, and environmental benefits. Transportation is the largest source of **greenhouse gas emissions** in Virginia, making a shift away from single-occupancy vehicle travel especially important. Passenger rail is 46 percent more energy efficient than automobiles and 34 percent more energy efficient than domestic air travel.¹ Increasing the number of trips taken by intercity and commuter rail can reduce pollution, improve air quality, lessen the harmful effects of transportation emissions on Virginia communities, and provide an affordable option for traveling to communities within Virginia or nearby states.

The launch of the **Transforming Rail in Virginia (TRV)** Initiative in 2019 has accelerated Virginia's return to rail. A 28 percent increase in Amtrak service has helped drive a 59 percent increase in ridership.² That growth has saved millions of gallons of fuel and avoided hundreds of thousands of tons of carbon pollution.³

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Since December 2019, Virginia has finalized agreements with CSX and Norfolk Southern to acquire 412 miles of railroad right-of-way and 251 miles of track, construct 50 miles of new track, and expand the Potomac River rail crossing to double capacity between Washington, DC, and Virginia. These agreements are central to the Transforming Rail in Virginia (TRV) program,⁴ a multi-corridor, multi-year, multi-phase effort to expand passenger rail service. Together, they will enable six new Amtrak Regional round trips, extend service from Roanoke to Christiansburg, and allow five Virginia Railway Express trains to be added on the Fredericksburg line, including weekend service. In addition to expanding service, these projects are expected to reduce travel times and improve reliability.

The TRV agreements also create a path for phased electrification of rail service as the DC–Richmond–North Carolina corridor is fully built out. At the same time, Virginia should pursue opportunities and emerging technologies that can begin reducing emissions on its rail corridors sooner.

The state has also completed a feasibility study for the return of direct east-west passenger rail service along the **Commonwealth Corridor** as part of the 2022 **Virginia State Rail Plan**. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) has accepted the corridor into its Corridor Identification and Development Pro-

gram, placing the project in the federal development pipeline along with the Bristol to Washington corridor and the transitioning of the Amtrak Cardinal train to daily service.

OPPORTUNITIES

Continued investment in passenger rail would deliver even greater benefits. Travel times and reliability can still greatly improve, many stations need repair and modernization, and transit connections between rail stations and major activity centers are often limited or missing altogether.

Additional service is also needed. Virginia's passenger rail network is oriented primarily north-south, with very limited east-west service. And while rail travel is already far less polluting and more energy efficient than driving, electrifying more of Virginia's rail network—building on the existing electrified segment north of Washington, DC—would further reduce emissions, shorten travel times, and better protect Virginians from future energy price shocks. So far, however, cost and other barriers have slowed progress.

Virginia should also shift more freight traffic from roads to rail to reduce pollution and congestion while supporting the transition to zero-emission trains. The Commonwealth should consider incentives to move freight from trucks to rail, while also preparing for potential rail line abandonments by major freight railroads, such as CSX and Norfolk Southern, and positioning itself to acquire those corridors for future passenger or freight service.

Two of the biggest opportunities in the near future are to identify the next generation of Transforming Rail in Virginia projects (TRV 2.0) and define the benefits they could deliver once the current slate of projects are completed in 2030. Virginia should also aggressively support Virginia Railway Express (VRE) in accelerating implementation of its promising 2050 System Plan.⁵

Lastly, it is important that the Commonwealth and local government partners continue modernizing and upgrading passenger rail stations, which serve as the gateways into and out of our communities—including adding modern amenities, robust transit and bike/pedestrian access, ADA compliant accessibility, and the capacity necessary to handle current and future levels of passenger rail ridership.

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TOP TAKEAWAYS

Virginia's Amtrak ridership is growing, breaking 2 million passengers for the first time in FY 2023, and continued funding for our Virginia-supported Amtrak trains would allow continued growth.

The success of Virginia's rail system depends on consistent and increased funding and the continued progress of the current TRV program, as well as supporting efforts to expedite VRE's 2050 System Plan.

Our Amtrak trains are already much more environmentally friendly than other modes of travel, but transitioning to zero-emissions train technologies while increasing our stations' connectivity to pedestrian, bike, and transit infrastructure would result in a much more healthy, affordable, clean, and accessible passenger rail network.

ENDNOTES

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2. *Amtrak in Virginia: Fiscally Year 2025*. (2025). Amtrak. <https://www.amtrak.com/content/dam/projects/dotcom/english/public/documents/corporate/statefactsheets/VIRGINIA25.pdf>
3. *Virginia's Amtrak Intercity Trains*. (n.d.). Virginians for High Speed Rail. https://www.vhsr.com/files/ugd/bff6bb_7384c148b7f84bbb99ec25fc649218a.pdf
4. *Service Plans*. (n.d.). Virginia Passenger Rail Authority. <https://vapassengerrailauthority.org/transformingrail/service-plans/>
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Atlantic Coastline Bridge in Richmond, VA
Photo by Lisa L. Watkins

