

# ON THE FAST TRACK

News From Virginians For High Speed Rail

Fall 2003

## VA Senators Support Amtrak By Signing Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison Letter; Senate Vote Upholds Amtrak Funding

by Nancy Finch, VHSR Director of Communications and Government Affairs

"That is good news," was the response of Sen. John Watkins (R-Chesterfield) on learning that both Sen. John Warner and Sen. George Allen were among nine Republican senators who signed a letter to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN) seeking his leadership in retaining \$1.346 billion for Amtrak.

The Senate voted to support the Hutchison request on October 23. Sen. Watkins has been a leader in rail legislation in the Virginia General Assembly.

Amtrak President David Gunn had asked for \$1.8 billion and said the House of Representatives (and the President's) \$900 million will "shut down" Amtrak.

Rail advocates were jubilant over the Senate vote. A conference committee will hammer out the differences. With an adjournment goal of November 7, rail leaders and citizens were

urged to contact conference committee members to encourage prevalence of the Senate position. Fear was expressed that a compromise would seriously endanger Amtrak since Gunn said the Senate's cut-back from his request allows operation to continue and hopefully will not worsen deferred maintenance but promises nothing more.

Senator John Warner, speaking to a Virginia visitor attending the High Speed Ground Transportation Association lobbying day on Capitol Hill, affirmed his strong support for the Amtrak funding.

Bill Greenup, VHSR president, urged Virginians for High Speed Rail and other rail organizations to commend both Virginia senators for their votes on Amtrak funding. "Too often we complain about actions of our elected officials," Greenup said. "This is an instance where we need to let them know we appreciate what they did."

### Amtrak—Our National Rail Can't Be Dumped

So, why is it important to save Amtrak?

The executive director of the Utah Department of Transportation said it perfectly in comments circulated by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

John R. Njord said, "A robust national rail transportation network that moves both passengers and freight efficiently across international borders, across state lines and within regional and state boundaries is essential to this nation's continued economic growth and vitality..."

And what is the only *existing* hope of such a system? Amtrak.

### Senator Fritz Hollings, Rail Supporter at HSGTA

"Amtrak saved us on 9/11," said Sen. Ernest F. Hollings, ranking member of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, speaking to the October High Speed Ground Transportation Association's Legislative Conference in Washington. Hollings described how Amtrak trains kept moving when all other transportation halted during the terrorists' attack on New York and Washington in 2001.

"We are in a dangerous circumstance with Amtrak," Hollings said. Since Amtrak was

created in 1971, Hollings says only \$25 billion has been spent on passenger rail compared with \$580 billion on highways and airways.

"We have spent \$35 billion on airways since 9/11—more money than we've spent on rail in the last 30 years," Hollings said.

Hollings plugged "ARRIVE 21," a bill that he is submitting with Sen. Tom Carper (D-DE). The American Railroad Revitalization, Investment and Enhancement Act of the 21st Century (ARRIVE 21) will be his attempt to put Amtrak on a solid footing that would reduce the amount needed for Amtrak's annual appropriation.

Hollings' bill is a vastly broad-based rail bill that combats congestion, provides alternatives for travelers, and addresses an estimated doubling in U.S. freight traffic over the next two decades by providing states with the resources to develop infrastructure for improved passenger and freight rail service. The Rail Infrastructure and Finance Corporation (RIFCO) that would be created could issue \$30 billion in tax-credit bonds over six years.

### We Should Be Embarrassed

Congressman Jack Quinn (R-NY), chairman of the House Railroads Subcommittee, said, "The amount we put into rail in this country ought to embarrass us. What we need are cheerleaders. I believe there will be opportunity for some demonstration projects for high speed rail.

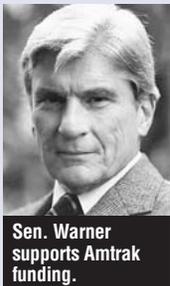
"We're going to have to interact with each other. We need to put the puzzle together. I think it can be done," said Quinn of the need to work together on rail legislation in Congress. Quinn said he is encouraged by the number of senators and representatives who attended the HSGTA events. "We have to talk about partnering."

### High Speed Ground Transportation Association

*In 1983 the HSGTA was founded to assemble a unified voice for high speed ground transportation. More than 800 members represent rail equipment, engineers, public officials, utilities, private citizens, organizations and diverse interests that support rail. HSGTA and States for Passenger Rail Coalition held a conference in Washington Oct. 28–29 to hear from Congressional leaders and to lobby members of Congress in support of rail.*



Sen. Allen asked for funding of \$1.3 billion for Amtrak.



Sen. Warner supports Amtrak funding.

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## 2003 Rice Award Winners

### Annie & Bob Bryant, Buckingham Branch Railroad Company

**The 2003 W. Thomas Rice Rail Renaissance Award will be presented to Annie and Bob Bryant.**

The Bryants, certainly two of the most sincerely nice people in the rail industry, purchased the Buckingham Branch from CSX Transportation in 1989. Bob was retiring from CSX at the time, and he and Annie are both from the area. The combination of railroading experience and an appreciation of the line's potential were a natural fit, which soon led to a shortline freight rail success story.

Today's Buckingham Branch Railroad can trace its origin to the Buckingham Railroad Company, incorporated in 1879 as a subsidiary of the Richmond & Allegheny Railroad. By mid-1885, four miles of track to the slate mines at Arvonnia were in operation. In 1893, an additional 16 miles of track was completed from Arvonnia through Dillwyn to Rosney, tapping lumber sources near the two towns. The Buckingham Railroad was absorbed into the C&O in 1897.

Passenger service was started over the 20 miles between Breomo and Rosney, and by 1916 there were



Annie and Bob Bryant have operated the Buckingham Branch Railroad in Dillwyn, VA since purchasing it in 1989.

two trains in each direction. Service was reduced in 1933 to a single mixed (freight and passenger) train each

way. The four miles from Dillwyn to Rosney were abandoned late in the Depression. Mixed trains continued until 1955, when passenger service was discontinued. Freight service only was provided by the C&O (now CSX) from 1955 until the Bryants purchased the railroad in 1989.

The Buckingham Branch Railroad, affectionately known as the "BB," now consists of 17.3 miles of track from Dillwyn to Breomo and includes 18 bridges. The BB runs three days a week and whenever additional trains are needed. Passenger excursions are conducted on occasions with restored cars. The BB moves freight carloads of Kyanite ore, untreated cross-ties, stripped and trimmed trees, and crushed stone from Dillwyn and other points in Buckingham County to the CSX interchange point in Strathmore. CSX then takes the cars to their final destination.

Rail service in Buckingham County is the key to industrial growth and new business. Congratulations to Annie & Bob Bryant for the vision to grasp this opportunity and make a success of the "BB"!

## Amtrak — Where is This Train Going?

The survival of Amtrak depends on proper funding, yes — but **day to day, week to week, Amtrak's survival is dependent on one singular determined individual, David Gunn, President. He is our one best hope — without David Gunn, all bets are off the table.** Gunn's realistic and disciplined brand of leadership is just what Amtrak has needed.

Gunn has been described off the record by the Bush Administration as too aggressive, too much of a "bully." Certainly no one at Amtrak had ever threatened a shutdown if proper funding was not forthcoming. **Historically, Amtrak has been forced to beg and borrow enough funds to stay alive. Witness:** The mortgaging of New York's Penn Station in 2001 to get through a cash crisis in that fiscal year. **Witness:** Another cash crisis in the late summer of 2002 when Congress passed the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Bill, providing Amtrak \$205 million. This was in addition to the DOT loan of \$100 million in June of that year. **Witness:** The 2001 and 2002 fiscal year funding for Amtrak vs. the other modes:

Federal Transportation Funds 2001–2002	Amount of Change 1982–2002
Highways . . . . . \$ 33 billion	Doubled . . . . . + 110%
Airways . . . . . 13 billion	Tripled . . . . . + 234%
Amtrak . . . . . \$21 billion	Decreased . . . . . - 59%

True, Amtrak received \$1.05 billion for fiscal year 2003, which ended on September 30,

2003, but that was barely enough to survive. Not much was done in regard to **deferred maintenance, with more than 100 wrecked train cars and locomotives needing repair.** In the **Northeast Corridor** alone, **some of the bridges are 110 years old, some of the overhead catenary, the electric cable, is 60 to 80 years old.** During a recent blackout, two of the three cables went out. Had the third cable gone out, Amtrak as well as Commuter Rail traffic could have been interrupted, possibly for months. **All of the tunnels in New York, Baltimore and Washington were built between 1890 and 1920.**

Obviously, there is a great need for infrastructure funding, the very thing that is lacking each year.

**Ridership for fiscal 2003 was the highest in Amtrak's history, 24.028 million, up 3% from the year before.** The numbers got stronger as the year progressed, with September long distance ridership up 22% and short distance ridership up 10%.

**One final point is most important — adequate funding for Amtrak should also be considered funding for future High Speed Rail. The two are connected. We are unlikely to ever get from where we are now to where we aspire to be in the future, if we fail to adequately fund Amtrak needs now!**



Failure to fund Amtrak now will mean failure for high speed rail in the future.

## Putting Rail In Perspective

Personal Views and Observations  
By Richard L. Beadles

# Sending a Message to Amtrak: Drop Dead!

In a recent series of Congressional votes on Amtrak funding, one member of our Virginia delegation stood out for his negative votes. When asked for an explanation, this particular Representative responded, through a staffer, that



Richard Beadles

he wanted to send Amtrak a message: "to shape up, to become more efficient, or else!" Subsequent exchanges with the staff person failed to identify any specific efficiency issues, leaving one to conclude that this particular Congressman's negative view of Amtrak was, most likely, a reflection of largely uninformed anti-passenger rail bias that is most notably reflected in the position of the Bush Administration.

Ironically, this same Bush White House has recently nominated Robert Crandall, retired CEO of AMR, parent of

American Airlines, to become a member of the Amtrak board. Mr. Crandall, who's appointment must yet be confirmed by the Senate, will certainly bring business expertise and experience to Amtrak.

From the Richmond Times-Dispatch Editorial Page, "Week's End", December 21, 2002:

*Quote of the Week: Robert Crandall, retired president of American Airlines, on performance of the airline industry: "The airline business has long produced unsatisfactory results for its investors. During the seven decades of its existence, it has rarely earned its cost of capital: In the years since Orville and Wilbur first flew, the industry has produced a cumulative financial loss."*

Perhaps Mr. Crandall will be able to explain to all of us why Amtrak should be expected to be profitable while the commercial aviation industry is not; why Amtrak funding is



viewed by the White House as unjustifiable "subsidy," while billions of general fund Federal dollars for aviation are not?

Failure of Federal policy to adequately fund Amtrak, the foundation upon which future higher speed passenger rail service must be built, is tantamount to telling Amtrak (and High Speed Rail planners) to: "Drop Dead!"

## Bridges, the Achilles Heel of Rail Network Capacity and Operating Flexibility

From the American Civil War, to World War II and even more recently, rail bridges have been high-priority targets of those seeking to disrupt vital transport networks, and thus diminish rail transport capabilities. The "transportation plan" executed by the U.S. 8th Air Force, and others, in western Europe during early 1944 is a textbook example.

Military action is by no means the only way to achieve the disruptive ends described in the preceding paragraph. Benign neglect of the rail mode of transportation, as a result of intentional or unintentional public policy decisions; let's say the unintended consequences of public transportation policy, may achieve much the same result, albeit without heavy ordinance.

Beginning in the late 1960s and continuing through the dark days of railroad bankruptcies in the 70s, and accelerating after rail deregulation in the 1980s, cash-starved private freight railroads often jettisoned routes due, in part, to their absolute inability, or unwillingness for business reasons, to maintain costly bridges. While these may have been good business decisions, they were often terrible losses of rail infrastructure from the broader public perspective.

Petersburg, VA, for example, lost two of its three rail crossings of the Appomattox River in the aftermath of the merger of the former ACL and SAL rail systems. The surviving merged company, Seaboard Coast Line, now CSX, may be forgiven. If they did not need these routes, they should not have to maintain them, but where was the Commonwealth of Virginia? Now, almost 20 years later, the State, through its Department of Rail and Public



H. Reid, 1971. C. McIntyre collection

Transportation, is scrambling to figure out how to restore rail passenger service to Norfolk and the South Hampton Roads region, as well as to reconnect with North Carolina via the former "S" line down the I-85 corridor, the former being a missing link in the proposed Southeast High Speed Rail route. To have preserved what has been lost at Petersburg might have cost the public \$1 million, more or less, in the 1980s, whereas the cost of reacquiring and reconstructing is likely to run into the hundreds of millions

of dollars, and take years to accomplish.

As this is written, Norfolk Southern has indicated its desire to abandon and remove their so-called High Bridge line, a portion of the former N&W passenger main serving Farmville and central Virginia. Word is that the famous High Bridge is simply too expensive to maintain. While we should not seek to be punitive, relative to the private rail operator's business decision, the loss of this line, which is important to the future success of the proposed TransDominion Express service, as well as to on-line industrial and economic development, would be most unfortunate.

**A well conceived, appropriately-structured and reasonably-funded Virginia Rail Development Authority is needed to deal with such situations. The Governor and the General Assembly of Virginia will have an opportunity in the 2004 Session to make such an authority a viable element of Virginia's multi-modal transportation development infrastructure. Concerned Virginians will be watching!**

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## Check It Out: [www.vhsr.com](http://www.vhsr.com)

A glitzy new webpage is complete and ready for visitors to learn about Virginians for High Speed Rail. A webmaster has been engaged who will post rail news to keep the website updated.

**Bombardier Transportation** lent artwork of its flashy red **JetTrain** that is used on

the website and, also, in a new VHSR portable conference display.

The original VHSR website was designed by **Walter Witschey**, Chairman of **Richmond Friends of Rail** and Director of the **Science Museum of Virginia**. "I just did it so we could have a website," Witschey said. He praised the design of the new website and the work of the designer, **Peter Feddo**.

The inaugural "news" story

features a picture of Senators **John Watkins** and **Wib Gulley (NC)** and a story about the October meeting in Raleigh of the **Virginia/North Carolina High Speed Rail Commission** co-chaired by the two senators.

News of Virginia rail interest can be forwarded to **Willard Andrews** for submission to the website.



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