

High-Speed Rail Update

2010 General Assembly Update

By Laura S. Bowser

During this General Assembly session several pieces of legislation were introduced with the intention of advancing intercity and high-speed passenger rail in the Commonwealth.

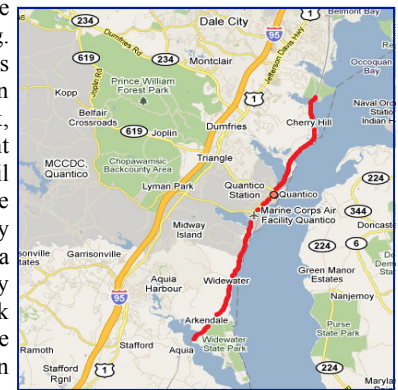
Senate Joint Resolution 63 (SJ 63), introduced by Senator Yvonne Miller, sought to establish a Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation study to review the best means for the funding of intercity and high-speed passenger rail operations within the Commonwealth. VHSR worked tirelessly to educate our politicians on the importance of this legislation, and as a result the bill passed both the House of Delegates and State Senate with unanimous support.

The passing of SJ 63 is vital to the survival of all Virginia's regional intercity passenger rail service. This includes the Amtrak Northeast Regional trains that begin in Newport News, Richmond, and Lynchburg, as well as future expansions to Roanoke and Norfolk. By 2013, all Regional Amtrak service will have to be

VA Takes First Step Towards High-Speed Rail

By Daniel L. Plaughter

Virginia is getting on the high-speed rail train with a \$75 million investment by the federal government from the first round of high-speed rail funding. This investment will fund 11.4 miles of additional track between Arkandale and Powell's Creek, which will upgrade over 10 percent of the Richmond to Washington rail corridor and improve the on-time performance of Virginia's intercity and commuter rail services. Virginia also flexed \$10 million in high-way stimulus funds for engineering work on CSX's Acca Yard to improve passenger rail service between Richmond's Staples Mill and Main Street stations, as well as Amtrak service to Williamsburg and Newport



Improvements to the I-95 rail corridor include 11.4 miles in Price William and Stafford Counties, 30 miles south of Washington, D.C.

Legislation continued on next page

High-Speed Rail continued on next page



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High-speed rail continued from front page

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Furthermore, Washington, D.C. received \$2.9 million to begin the process of replacing the Long Bridge over the Potomac River, a major congestion point for trains traveling between the Northeast and Southeast corridors. North Carolina received \$545 million to upgrade their Raleigh to Charlotte corridor to emerging high-speed rail (90 mph), which will improve the on-time performance of the long-distance Amtrak trains that serve Virginia. With the first \$8 billion in initial high-speed rail funding allocated, there is still \$2.5 billion available for 2010, and President Obama has requested \$1 billion annually for 2011 through 2014.

While Virginia begins to upgrade the Washington to Richmond rail corridor to high-speed rail, the Commonwealth Transportation Board has designated the Richmond/Petersburg to Norfolk corridor, along Route 460, the official Hampton Roads high-speed rail corridor, with service up-to 90 mph, in addition to enhanced intercity passenger rail along the I-64 corridor serving Williamsburg and Newport News. The Federal Railroad Administration must now approve Virginia's decision, which will allow the Commonwealth to pursue federal funding for high-speed rail.

Virginians for High Speed Rail continues to support 110 mph passenger rail service between Richmond and Norfolk, and reliable 89 mph service between Richmond and Newport News, and believes both can be done incrementally to maximize the level of passenger rail service connecting the Hampton Roads region.

Lastly, Amtrak reports that the new Lynchburg-Washington Northeast Regional train (part of the Amtrak three year demonstration project), which began operation in October, 2009, has performed far beyond expectations, reaching 73% of its annual ridership goal and 77% of its annual revenue goal in its first four months of operation. The success of the Lynchburg Northeast Regional train has led to the addition of an Amtrak station at Burke Centre in Fairfax, and the additional Richmond-Washington Northeast Regional train will launch this summer.

Save The Date

Southeast High Speed Rail Conference:

10th Anniversary

Where: Richmond, Virginia **When:** November 2010

For more information visit: www.SoutheastHSR.org

Legislation continued from front page

funded through federal/state partnerships, and SJ 63 creates a study to review how Virginia can successfully accomplish the federal/state partnership.

* * *

FY 2010-2012 Budget Item 448, introduced by Delegate Kirkland Cox, amended the Governor's budget to authorize the allocation of up to \$6 million in Rail Enhancement Funds to be utilized for the operations of the second year of Amtrak's three-year demonstration project, until the study authorized in **SJ 63** is completed. This project includes the Northeast Regional train that starts and terminates in Lynchburg, and the new train that will launch from Richmond this summer, which will be extended to Norfolk when the necessary infrastructure improvements are completed.

Item 448 will also pay for the infrastructure improvements between Richmond and Norfolk to allow the expansion of intercity passenger rail to Southside Hampton Roads. Due to the overwhelming need for these passenger rail projects, the amendment also waived the 30 percent local match requirement for both the infrastructure and operations components.

This amendment is historic as it will be the first time the Rail Enhancement Funds will be used for the advancement of high-speed rail, and for the operation of passenger rail service. The amendment has a positive impact on over 4.5 million Virginians, as it will help to fund infrastructure improvements to expand Amtrak passenger rail service to an underserved market of over 1.5 million Virginians in South Hampton Roads, in addition to providing operational support to continue service between Lynchburg and Washington, D.C., and the new Richmond to Washington, D.C. service.

As of March 23, 2010 the budget is awaiting Governor Bob McDonnell's signature.

* * *

House Bill 1275, patroned by Delegate John Cosgrove, sought to establish a Virginia High Speed Rail Commission, which would aid and promote the Commonwealth's competitive stance for matters relating to high-speed passenger rail. The commission would have replaced the congressionally authorized and legislatively enacted Virginia-North Carolina High Speed Rail Compact.

While the intentions of the legislation were good, it would have negatively impacted Virginia's ability to garner federal funding for high-speed rail and was tabled for the year to allow the Virginia-North Carolina High Speed Rail Compact, chaired by Virginia State Senator John Watkins, to resume meeting.

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