



VIRGINIA'S PASSENGER TRAINS

What's Next? Regional Rail Post-Pandemic

Virginia has become a national leader in advancing intercity passenger rail, following years of advocacy, policy changes, and investments that significantly expanded and improved service. Record ridership resulted. Public and political support grew with recognition of the many benefits of passenger rail, including providing people greater transportation choices, increasing energy efficiency, curbing pollution, and improving economic competitiveness. Then COVID-19 hit, and the pandemic caused rail ridership to crater.

Where do we go from here? In the short term, safety measures put in place reflect best practices and steps that people want, according to a recent survey, to feel safer returning to rail. Ridership has begun to gradually recover, and reduced fares should be instituted to encourage using rail for intercity trips people are currently taking as well as to help increase ridership post-pandemic. At the same time, it is essential that we maintain our rail network so it is ready to help rebuild our economy and that we continue to advance a vision for the future. We must move forward with steps that will strengthen passenger rail in Virginia by expanding service, increasing connectivity, and improving on-time performance.



BUILDING THE FOUNDATION

When Virginia sponsored its first intercity Amtrak regional service in 2009, it was the culmination of over a decade of advocacy and planning, and it set the stage for a passenger rail renaissance in the Commonwealth.

The string of significant steps that led to Virginia's first regional intercity passenger service in the modern era included extending the federal Southeast High Speed Rail Corridor to include Hampton Roads (1995), securing \$65 million in state funding to improve the Washington-Richmond rail corridor (2001), creating the federally designated Virginia-North Carolina High Speed Rail Compact (2004), and establishing Virginia's Rail Enhancement Fund (2005). When an opportunity to expand intercity passenger rail service arose, passenger rail advocates across Virginia spent nearly two years holding community meetings, making presentations to civic groups, and securing resolutions and letters of support.

On October 1, 2009, Virginia officially launched a new daily regional service, extending an Amtrak route from Washington, D.C. to Charlottesville and Lynchburg. This was the first expansion of passenger rail service in the Commonwealth in over a generation, and ridership and revenues far exceeded expectations. Building upon this success, Virginia became a leader in improving passenger rail over the next decade. From 2009 to 2019, passenger rail service was expanded by 31 percent, including extending service from Washington to Richmond (2010), adding two round-trip trains from Richmond to Norfolk (2013

and 2019), and extending service from Lynchburg to Roanoke (2017).

A critical factor fueling this investment was the creation of the Intercity Passenger Rail Operating and Capital Fund (IPROC). Virginians for High Speed Rail built the coalition that helped make IPROC a reality, a coalition including environmental groups (led by the Southern Environmental Law Center), business organizations, transportation advocates, and labor unions. This work included drafting the legislative study that recommended IPROC (2010), advocating for the General Assembly to create it (2011), securing \$55 million in initial funding (2012), and fighting to secure a dedicated revenue source for it as part of a comprehensive legislative transportation package (2013).

A similar coalition supported legislation reorganizing Virginia's transportation funding pots during the 2020 General Assembly session, which led to IPROC being rolled into a new Commonwealth Rail Fund that receives 7.5 percent of the state's transportation trust fund.¹ This means an estimated 22 percent increase in annual funding (pre-pandemic) for rail.² Another success in the 2020 session was the creation of the Virginia Passenger Rail Authority.³ Among other things, VPRA is designed to assume the administrative and fiduciary responsibilities for Virginia's state-supported passenger rail services, and it can own rail assets and right-of-way as well as design, build, finance, operate, and maintain rail facilities. Creation of this authority will be instrumental in future expansion of passenger rail and is something rail advocates supported for years.

Impacts of Amtrak Regional Service in Virginia

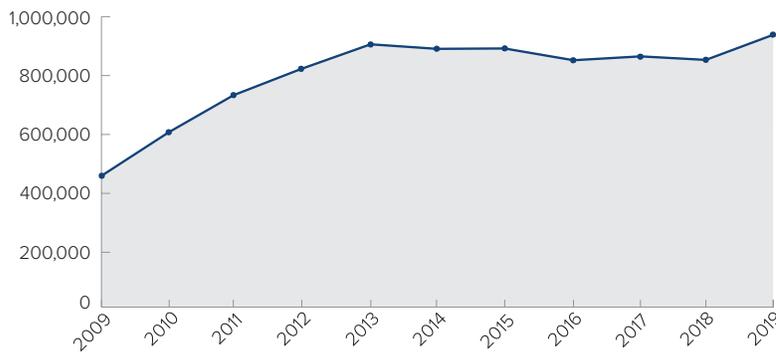
Year	Regional Ridership	Passenger Miles Traveled	Fuel saved (gallons)	CO ₂ prevented (Metric Tons)	Economic Benefits Generated	Jobs Created/Sustained
FY 2009	446,604	79,397,259	1,675,700	14,896	\$212,841,418	2,163
FY 2019	924,657	180,173,091	3,802,601	33,803	\$639,632,932	6,500

A DECADE OF DIFFERENCE

The expansion of Virginia’s passenger rail network resulted in substantial ridership growth, demonstrating the demand and public support for rail service.

In FY2009, ridership on Virginia’s regional trains was 446,604; by FY2019 ridership grew 107 percent to 924,657. This growth had a significant impact on our overall transportation system, moving over 100 million more potential passenger miles each year from our roads onto our passenger trains.⁴

Amtrak Regional Ridership in Virginia: FY09-FY19



From FY 2010-2019, Virginia’s regional trains handled a total of 1.57 billion passenger miles, prevented the burning of 33.2 million gallons of fuel, and avoided the release of 295,000 metric tons of CO₂ emissions. Over the last decade, our regional trains and the investments made to improve them generated \$5.2 billion in economic benefits and created or sustained nearly 5,300 jobs in the Commonwealth annually.⁵

By every standard, Virginia’s investment in improved and expanded Amtrak regional service has paid significant dividends.

2020 AND THE PANDEMIC

This past year was a tale of two distinct halves.

For the first five months of FY 2020 (October-February), monthly ridership on Virginia’s Amtrak regional trains averaged 21 percent higher—over 14,000 more passengers per month—than the same months in FY 2019. Had those trends continued, ridership would have exceeded 1 million annual passengers on our

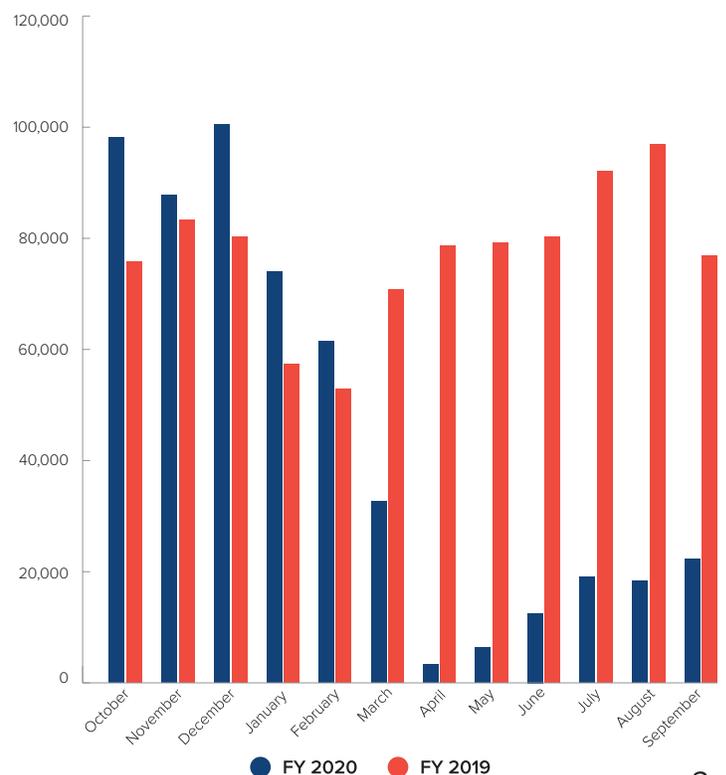
regional trains for the first time.

However, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread and stay-at-home orders were issued, Virginia’s regional train service decreased from six daily round-trip trains to three. This decrease in service, coupled with quarantining and reduced traveling, led to a dramatic ridership decline.

From March to September 2020 (the end of Amtrak’s fiscal year), ridership on Virginia’s regional trains was down 80 percent compared to the same months in FY 2019, going from an average of 84,000 passengers per month (October to February) to just 16,000 passengers per month. Ridership bottomed out at 3,300 passengers in April, but has steadily increased since then to over 22,300 passengers in September 2020. If current trends continue, it will take at least seven months to return to normal ridership.

However, given the continued spread of COVID-19 as this report is written, it may take at least a year to return to normal ridership numbers.

Amtrak Regional Ridership in Virginia: Monthly Comparison



WHAT'S NEXT?

Virginians for High Speed Rail recently conducted a survey to gauge the thoughts and opinions of Virginians on the health, safety, and accessibility measures that would make them feel comfortable returning to train travel for intercity trips.

This survey was completed by 647 individuals, and it was geared to people who have ridden on Virginia's intercity trains.⁶ Only 18 percent of respondents have taken an Amtrak train since February 2020; however, 50 percent said they intend to take a trip via Amtrak within the next year while another 44 percent would consider doing so.

Respondents said the following initiatives are likely or very likely important for them to feel safer and more comfortable taking Amtrak:

- Mask mandate: 88 percent
- Decreased Seat Capacity: 82 percent
- Increased Disinfecting: 82 percent
- Reduced Fares: 66 percent
- Adding Sleeper Cars: 37 percent (with another 28 percent unsure)

The most frequent comment from survey respondents was the importance of a vaccine, underscoring how important solving this health crisis is to reversing the recent ridership decline.

Virginia's short-term goal should be to put (or keep) the following measures in place to reduce COVID risks and encourage people who choose to take intercity trips to use passenger rail:

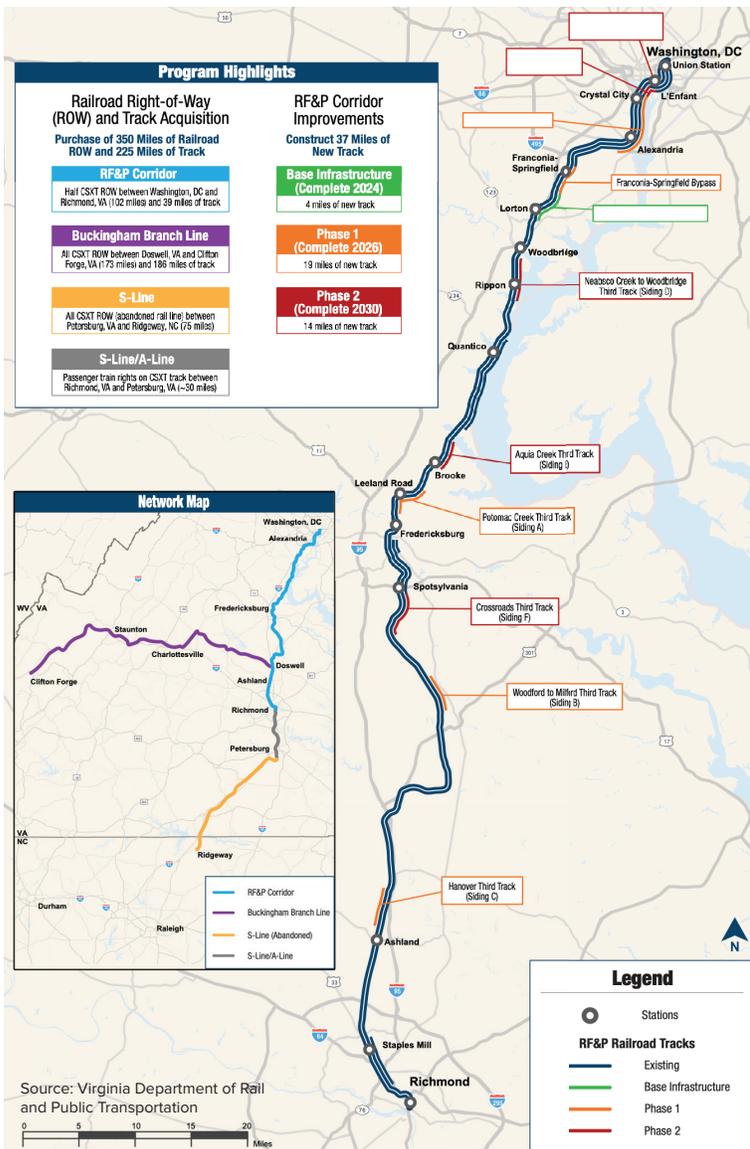
- **Mask mandate***: Wearing a mask has been proven to reduce the spread of COVID-19; requiring all rail travelers to adhere to this guideline ensures the safest travel environment.
- **Decreased Seat Capacity***: To achieve social distancing, only half of the seats on each train should be sold until infection rates decrease significantly.
- **Increased Sanitization***: Amtrak is giving every train a deep-clean between each trip and disinfecting restrooms and frequently touched services regularly during trips that people are taking.
- **Reduced Fares**: The average ticket price between Washington and Richmond is \$44 round-trip in December 2020. With gas currently under \$2.50 a gallon, making ticket prices automobile-competitive can encourage travel by train for intercity trips.
- **Returning Daily Service and Sleeper Cars**: The frequency of many Amtrak national trains has been reduced from daily to tri-weekly service. Full daily service on these trains should be reinstated as soon as possible. Until this happens, sleeper cars that have been idled as a result of the current service reduction should be added to Virginia's regional service to allow passengers with pre-existing conditions or weakened immune systems to travel with an added level of safety.

*Measures Amtrak is implementing

These measures will help strengthen Virginia's intercity passenger rail network and help protect public health while the pandemic is ongoing.

VIRGINIA'S PASSENGER RAIL NETWORK





The Transforming Rail in Virginia program also includes \$1.9 billion to build an additional Potomac River rail crossing, doubling the capacity of the existing Long Bridge that is one of the most significant choke points for freight and passenger rail on the entire East Coast, as well as \$1.275 billion in improvements along the Washington to Richmond rail corridor. Of these investments, \$1.063 billion has been set aside in the state's current Six-Year Improvement Plan, Amtrak is anticipated to invest \$944 million, and Virginia received a \$14.4 million Federal Railroad Administration grant in November 2020.

These improvements will allow Virginia to nearly double the number of state supported regional trains, increasing overall Amtrak service by 53 percent by 2030. In addition, they will allow 39 percent more Virginia Railway Express (VRE) commuter rail trains overall—primarily along the Fredericksburg line by 2030—and that could expand to a 75 percent increase if a separate agreement with Norfolk Southern comes to fruition. Highlights from these service increases include four additional Richmond to Washington trains, two Hampton Roads-based Amtrak regional trains, and weekend VRE service.

These improvements are projected to remove 165 million additional passenger miles from our roadways, reduce CO₂ emissions by 43,000 metric tons, and generate over \$370 million in economic benefits annually.⁸

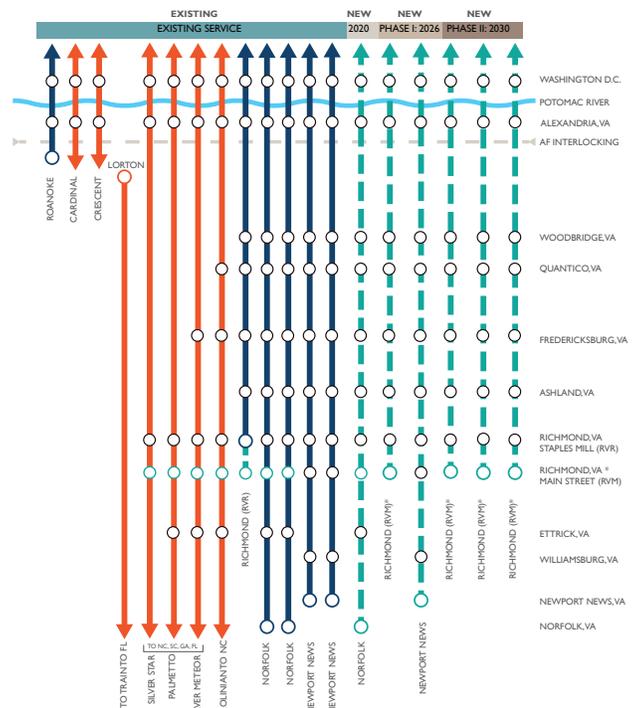
OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE NEXT DECADE

Virginia is well positioned to improve our passenger rail network following the unprecedented challenges of the current health crisis. Over the longer term, two exciting initiatives are underway that must continue to advance, and additional policies and projects are needed.

TRANSFORMING RAIL IN VIRGINIA PROGRAM

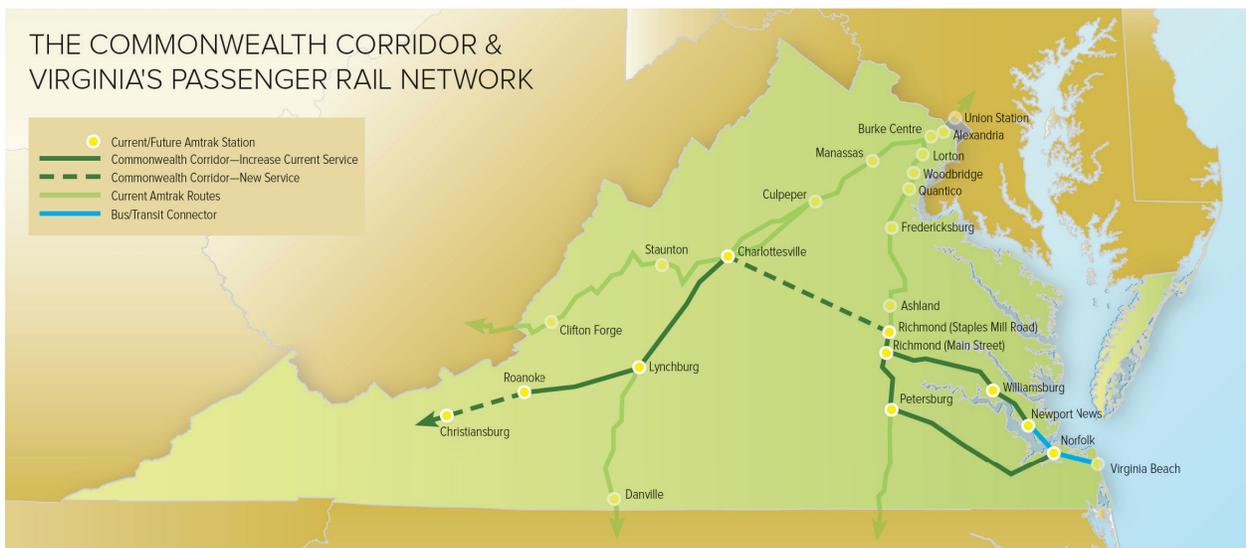
In December 2019, Governor Northam announced the Transforming Rail in Virginia program.⁷ This \$3.7 billion initiative is a paradigm shift in the Commonwealth's approach to passenger rail. As part of this initiative, the state would purchase key rail rights-of-way and infrastructure from CSX: a 49 percent stake in the corridor between Richmond and Washington, D.C., the "S-line" from Petersburg to the North Carolina border, and the Buckingham Branch Railroad between Clifton Forge and Doswell. Spending \$525 million to acquire these assets would give the Commonwealth much greater control over its transportation destiny.

VIRGINIA-CSX RAIL PROPOSAL AMTRAK SERVICE PLAN



AMTRAK ROUTES IN VIRGINIA, EXISTING AND PROPOSED

Source: Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation



VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH CORRIDOR

The Virginia Commonwealth Corridor is a proposed east-west passenger rail route that reconnects Southwest Virginia through Charlottesville to Richmond and Hampton Roads. This corridor was raised in a 2013 report from VHSR and SELC (*The Case for Virginia’s Regional Trains: The Foundation for the Future*⁹) and further developed in our 2019 report *Expanding Virginia’s Passenger Rail: Connecting the Blue Ridge to the Beach with the Commonwealth Corridor*.¹⁰

As our 2019 report noted, it takes over a dozen hours to travel between Hampton Roads and Roanoke by train today. Restoring east-west passenger rail service would have tremendous benefits, including improving connectivity for 3.7 million Virginians, 330,000 higher education students, 240,000 military and support staff, and 45 percent of our state’s jobs. When completed, we anticipate that trips along this corridor will remove 210 million passenger miles from our roadways, reduce fuel consumption by 6.3 million gallons, prevent the release of 56,000 metric tons of carbon pollution, and generate over \$411 million in economic benefits annually.

Virginia State Senator Jennifer McClellan and Delegate Sam Rasoul introduced resolutions (SJ50 and HJ55) in the 2020 General Assembly session requesting that the Department of Rail and Public Transportation study the feasibility of the Commonwealth Corridor. The study, passed by a combined vote of 129-2, is underway, and is anticipated to be completed by December 2021.

Further, as mentioned above, as part of the Transforming Rail in Virginia program, the state has agreed to purchase the Buckingham Branch Railroad between Clifton Forge and Doswell,

which includes the only portion of the Commonwealth Corridor that does not handle passenger rail service today. Acquiring this asset would bring the Commonwealth Corridor much closer to reality.

OTHER IMPORTANT RAIL INITIATIVES

Virginia Piedmont Corridor

The Roanoke/Lynchburg to Washington, D.C. regional train has been one of the best performing regional trains in Amtrak’s entire network for nearly a decade. Since 2014, a second daily round-trip on this corridor has been planned, and nearly \$32 million has been allocated for this service expansion. Although unexpected challenges have delayed the implementation of this service, a second daily train is greatly needed along the Virginia Piedmont corridor, and state officials should do everything they can to ensure this additional regional train service begins as soon as possible.

In addition, the regional service that currently runs from Washington, D.C. to Charlottesville, Lynchburg and Roanoke should be extended to the New River Valley, and a stop in Bedford should be added. A further extension of this service to Bristol should be evaluated as well.

Station and Accessibility Improvements

In addition to extending passenger rail service, two recent reports by the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) looked at how to improve, upgrade, and modernize Virginia’s rail stations,¹¹ as well as how to increase the accessibility of our stations by adding, increasing, and replacing the roadway signs that direct passengers (or potential passengers) to stations.¹²

According to DRPT’s Station Needs Assessment report, almost \$47 million worth of improvements are needed to increase amenities, improve the safety and security of our stations, upgrade station accessibility to disabled individuals, and expand the structural,



aesthetic, and operational functionality of our stations.

DRPT’s 2019 “Amtrak Station Wayfinding Signage Report” recommended replacing 55 of the Commonwealth’s 182 Amtrak roadway signs, and potentially adding 174 more signs around the state. The projected cost for these upgrades was \$1.4 million.

Making sure that stations are comfortable, safe, and accessible is vital to growing passenger rail ridership. While we are focused on advancing major rail projects, it is also critical to ensure that steps such as improving station directional signs and upgrading stations are undertaken as well.

The “Next Stop” Projects

As this report shows, successful improvement and expansion of passenger rail service takes time, patience, funding, and a strong foundation to build upon.

Additional steps we can take during the next decade that are both important in and of themselves and will help lay the foundation for further transformative projects include the following:

- Ensure that we have a strong, connected national passenger rail network by returning all of the Amtrak National trains that run through Virginia to daily service, as well as increasing the Cardinal (which has Virginia stops in Northern Virginia, Culpeper, Charlottesville, Staunton,

and Clifton Forge) from three times a week to daily service.

- Follow up the federal Tier I Environmental Impact Statement on improving passenger rail service between Richmond and Hampton Roads that was approved in 2012 with a more specific Tier II study once the D.C. to Richmond improvements that will benefit Richmond-Hampton Roads are funded and underway.
- Continue advancing the Southeast High Speed Rail Corridor and partner with North Carolina on the construction of the Richmond to Raleigh S-Line corridor for the future expansion of North Carolina trains into Virginia and beyond.
- Invest in dual-mode engines that can run on diesel or on electricity, where available, and take other steps to cut pollution and prepare for electrification of Virginia’s passenger rail corridors.

Policy Changes

In addition to the passenger rail projects noted above, policy changes are also needed to advance fast, frequent, and reliable passenger rail. Key steps include the following:

- Protect the funding dedicated to passenger rail and secure additional federal, state, and local resources.
- Support increased, sustained federal funding for Amtrak, since Virginia’s regional trains cannot operate without Amtrak—especially the Northeast Corridor service.
- Amend the federal Railroad Rehabilitation and Improvement Financing loan program to provide additional flexibility to states willing to fund improvements to passenger rail corridors.
- Continue to develop more rigorous metrics to assess the costs and benefits of alternatives to expand and enhance Virginia’s regional trains network, and to document the benefits provided by investments that are made (including energy savings, economic benefits, and pollution reduction).
- Ensure that no investment is made in a major new or expanded highway project without first determining whether there is a viable rail alternative for achieving the same or a comparable result at less cost and with less environmental impact.
- Ensure that future passenger rail investments promote more compact development patterns.

MOVING FORWARD

Virginia made tremendous progress in advancing passenger rail over the last decade. Despite the pandemic, there are many opportunities to build upon our recent success. We must show the public the safety measures being put into place, as well as maintain our rail network so

that it is ready to help rebuild and reopen our economy. Moreover, we must prepare for the day when COVID-19 is defeated and take advantage of the significant opportunities to strengthen passenger rail in Virginia for the next decade and beyond.



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ENDNOTES:

¹<https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?201+sum+HB1414>

²<http://hac.virginia.gov/documents/2020/Post-Session/HB%2030%20Individual%20Files/17%20-%20Transportation.pdf>

³<http://www.drpt.virginia.gov/vpra/>

⁴<https://www.amtrak.com/content/dam/projects/dotcom/english/public/documents/corporate/monthlyperformancereports/2019/Amtrak-Monthly-Performance-Report-FY2019-Final.pdf>

⁵Benefit numbers derived from data provided by Amtrak, US DOT, FHWA, US DOE, and EPA data.

⁶This survey was conducted between November 10 and November 30, 2020, and the general public was invited to participate.

⁷<https://www.governor.virginia.gov/newsroom/all-releases/2019/december/headline-850120-en.html>

⁸<http://www.vhsr.com/sites/default/files/2019-12/VirginiaPassengerRailInitiative.pdf?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=4559aa00-65ff-441a-9e9c-c808ba84b52d>

⁹<http://www.vhsr.com/sites/default/files/VARegionalReport.pdf>

¹⁰<http://www.vhsr.com/sites/default/files/2019-09/VCC%20Report%20Final.pdf>

¹¹<http://drpt.virginia.gov/media/2951/4-station-needs-assessment.pdf>

¹²<https://rga.lis.virginia.gov/Published/2020/RD8/PDF>

