

THE CASE FOR VIRGINIA'S REGIONAL TRAINS

The Foundation for the Future



DOUG HIDDELL/DRPT

Passenger Rail Ridership Setting Records

Passengers are flocking to Virginia's intercity and commuter rail services. Over the past five years, ridership has set new records. Demand for Amtrak regional trains has grown an astounding 99.8 percent since 2009, reaching 892,430 passengers in FY 2013.¹ This growth in ridership on the regional trains has led to a substantial increase in ridership overall. In FY 2008, just over one million trips were taken on all Amtrak trains in Virginia. By FY 2013, that number had climbed to over 1.6 million. Virginia has seen some of the greatest increase in passenger ridership in the country, and it has also had some of the best-performing state-supported routes in Amtrak's system.

The bottom line is that Virginians have demonstrated that they want more train service and they want the transportation choices that passenger rail helps to provide.

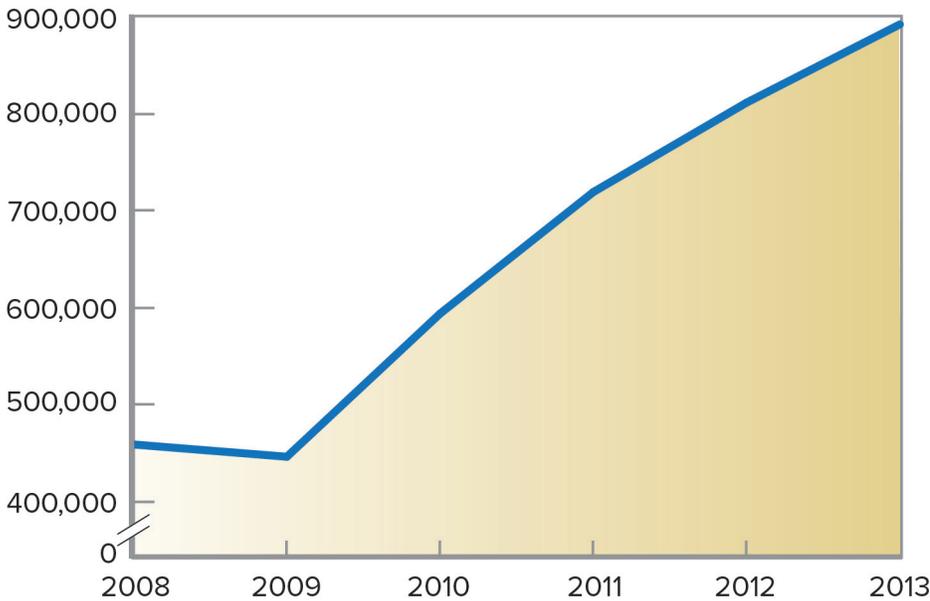
Expanded & Improved Service

Many factors are driving Virginia's surging passenger rail ridership, including expanded service, increased connectivity, and improved on-time performance.



The Commonwealth is currently served by six round-trip regional trains connecting 18 communities, with another five communities served by bus connectors. These trains serve 74.78 percent of Virginia's population and 80.85 percent of its economy,² 46 higher education institutions with over 450,000 students,³ more than 20 military installations, and over 60,000 active members of the military.⁴

Amtrak Ridership in Virginia



The Piedmont corridor includes stops in Lynchburg, Charlottesville, Culpeper, Manassas, Burke Centre, and Alexandria, and a train-to-bus connector extending from Lynchburg to Bedford, Roanoke, Salem, and Blacksburg. The Urban Crescent North corridor includes stops in Alexandria, Woodbridge, Quantico, Fredericksburg, Ashland, Richmond: Staples Mill Station, Richmond: Main Street Station, Williamsburg, and Newport News. And the Urban Crescent South corridor includes the stations between Alexandria and Richmond: Staples Mill, as well as stops in Petersburg and Norfolk and a bus connection to Virginia Beach. These trains all serve destinations along Amtrak's Northeast Corridor between Washington, DC and Boston.

All of these services have been started or expanded since 2008. For example, Governor Tim Kaine's administration launched the Piedmont regional train in 2009,⁵ followed by the new Richmond regional service in 2010.⁶ Governor Bob McDonnell's administration extended one of the Amtrak regional trains that terminated at Richmond: Staples Mill to Petersburg and Norfolk last year.⁷ In addition, since July 2011, Valley Metro and Virginia have operated an Amtrak bus connector between Lynchburg and Roanoke/Blacksburg that has exceeded ridership estimates by 281 percent.⁸

Further, the on-time performance of Virginia's Amtrak regional trains has improved significantly in recent years, rising from an average of 75.15 percent in 2011 to 84.5 percent in 2013.⁹

Multiple Benefits

Virginia's record passenger rail ridership has also been spurred by growing awareness of the economic, community, health, and environmental benefits of rail.

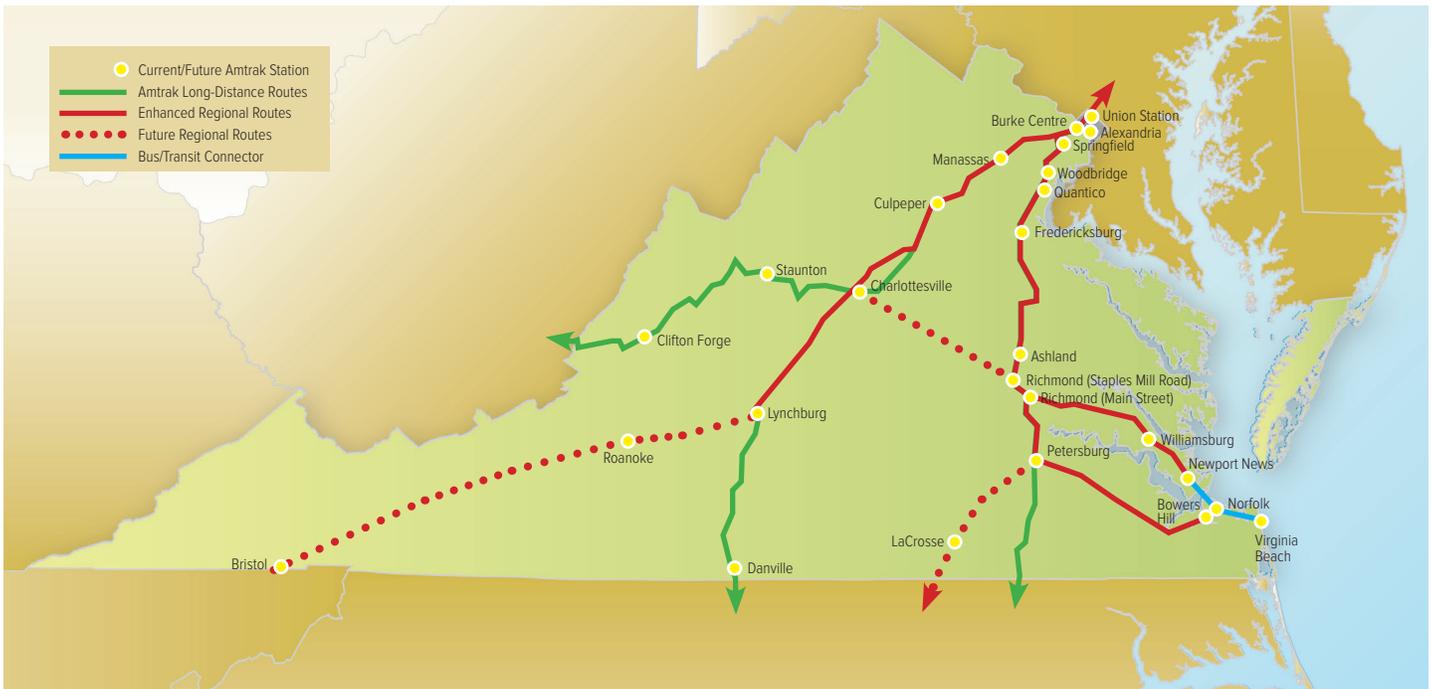
Our future prosperity is tied to our ability to efficiently move people and products. Increased congestion on our roadways and delays at our airports hamper our ability to attract and retain companies and jobs. Improved frequency and reliability of rail service can reduce congestion and has led more travelers to take the train to avoid travel delays and stress. Virginians commuting in the Washington, Richmond, and Hampton Roads metro areas spent an average of 43.3 hours a year in traffic delays and lost \$862 in time and wasted fuel.¹⁰ As our population grows by an estimated 2 million people over the next 20 years, congestion on our roads and at our airports is likely to increase as well, fueling further demand for passenger rail. Improved and expanded rail service also can help take cars off the road in corridors where additional highway projects would be prohibitively expensive and/or harm communities and our environment.

In addition, as our population ages, and an increasing share of the population lives in urban areas, more and more people will seek alternatives to driving. And passenger rail also can help maximize the energy efficiency and competitiveness of our economy by reducing dependence on foreign oil. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, passenger trains use 32 percent less energy per passenger mile than automobiles and 20 percent less than flying. Moreover, passenger rail can revitalize communities and stimulate development around stations, and it offers a cleaner transportation option that reduces air and water pollution.

These benefits have increased passenger rail demand, and led public officials, businesses, and citizens to support improved and expanded service.

New Funding Lays Foundation for the Future

We need to maintain and expand passenger rail service in Virginia. Our 2012 report, *The Case for Virginia's Regional Trains: Funding Passenger Rail*, highlighted the need for long-term funding, a case made more urgent by a mandate Congress included in the federal Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 (PRIIA) that meant the Commonwealth must fund our regional trains or risk losing them in October 2013.



To prepare to meet this mandate, the 2010 General Assembly passed a resolution requesting that the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) review funding sources for intercity and high-speed rail. DRPT's study, released in November 2010, laid out various options but primarily recommended creating an Intercity Passenger Rail Operating and Capital Fund (IPROC).¹¹ The 2011 General Assembly adopted a transportation package that included creation of such a fund, but it did not provide a revenue source for the fund.

During the 2012 General Assembly session, short-term funding for IPROC was secured when House of Delegates Speaker Bill Howell and Governor McDonnell led the effort to move \$26.1 million to IPROC from another rail fund, and Senator John Watkins secured \$28.7 million from the FY 2012 budget surplus for IPROC. However, this was only one-time funding.

Long-term, sustainable funding became a reality in 2013 due to the leadership of Governor McDonnell, Speaker Howell, Senator Watkins, and a strong bipartisan coalition of legislators. The transportation funding package the General Assembly adopted included provisions that made Virginia the first state to fund—in a sustainable and dedicated manner—advancement of intercity and high-speed passenger rail. It dedicates 0.05 percent of the state's sales and use tax to IPROC. Although a nickel per \$100 does not seem like much, it is projected to generate about \$256 million over the next five years alone.¹²

A Vision for the Future

The dedicated funding the General Assembly provided in 2013 provides the resources to make long-overdue investments and lays the foundation for the future of passenger rail in Virginia. Attention now is shifting to how these funds should be spent.

In general, opportunities to increase speeds, reliability, and service levels offer the greatest potential to improve intercity, regional rail. One day, true high-speed passenger rail—generally considered to be 220 mph or higher—may come to Virginia. However, for the foreseeable future, we should focus on building upon our recent investments to create an intercity passenger rail network that is more than competitive with driving with respect to trip times and reliability.

The engines that pull regional trains in Virginia have the ability to reach 110 miles per hour, yet the typical maximum speed is far less, primarily due to limitations on the capacity of our rail lines. Increasing the maximum speed of regional trains to 90 or 110 mph—depending on the line—would decrease travel time from Norfolk to Washington from 4 hours and 44 minutes today to 3 hours and 5 minutes, and from Newport News to Washington from 4 hours and 10 minutes today to 2 hours and 45 minutes.¹³ This type of reduction in trip times would have a tremendous impact on ridership and the economy. However, it will require a continued partnership between Virginia, Amtrak, and our host railroads (CSX and Norfolk Southern) to make this a reality, and it will be necessary to ensure that the Commonwealth's taxpayers get full value from any public-private partnership.

Another important opportunity to obtain faster service would be to switch Virginia's regional trains to dual-mode (electric and diesel) engines. Currently, engines in Virginia run on diesel, and there is a layover in Washington, DC while the engine is replaced with an electric engine before a train continues north. Switching to dual mode trains would reduce the layover in Washington by up to 30 minutes for trips heading to New York.

The opportunity to add more service is almost as important as increasing speed and reliability. Of the 24 round-

trip Amtrak regional trains operating on the Northeast Corridor between Washington and Boston, only six currently serve Virginia. There are eighteen regional trains that now terminate north of the Potomac River that could be extended to Lynchburg, Newport News, and Norfolk, providing more frequent service along these lines, or the routes of these trains could be extended further to serve additional destinations. This would enable the Commonwealth to increase regional service levels 400 percent without having to invest in costly train equipment.

Our vision over the next 10 to 15 years is simple but compelling. We want to triple the number of regional trains, reduce trip times by up to 35 percent, increase on-time reliability to over 90 percent, and expand regional service to reach 80 percent of Virginians. The following chart summarizes how key components of this vision for Virginia's regional train network might look:

Corridor	Daily Round-trips	Max Speed	Reliability	Trip Times	
				Washington	New York
Newport News-Richmond-Washington	6	90 mph	90%	2:45	6:15
Norfolk-Richmond-Washington	9	110 mph	90%	3:05	6:35
Roanoke-Lynchburg-Washington	5	89 mph	90%	4:10	7:40

Additional opportunities to expand service should be explored. For example, plans are already underway to extend the Piedmont service from Lynchburg to Roanoke in the next four years, and this service could be extended further into southwest Virginia—possibly reaching to Bristol. Also, a study is currently underway in cooperation with North Carolina for high-speed rail between Richmond and Raleigh, and Virginia has future plans for an intrastate train between Roanoke or Bristol in Southwest Virginia to Hampton Roads via Richmond. Some of these opportunities are outlined in the draft of Virginia's 2013 Statewide Rail Plan.

Next Steps

Virginia is well-positioned to achieve this vision of passenger rail's future. The Intercity Passenger Rail Operating and Capital Fund is one of the most comprehensive tools created to assist a state in advancing passenger rail. It can be used 1) to cover the operation of Virginia's current Amtrak regional trains, as well as future service expansions; 2) to invest in railroad infrastructure to enhance and improve passenger service; 3) to match any federal money available to advance intercity and high-speed rail; and 4) to cover the debt service on government bonds to do any of the above.

The Commonwealth must take the next steps needed to improve and increase its regional train service and to ensure that the taxpayers' resources are invested wisely.

Key steps include the following:

- Protect the baseline of funding recently dedicated to IPROC and secure additional federal, state, and local resources.
- Articulate and adopt a strong, clear long-term vision for passenger rail. To date, state rail plans have tended to focus on short-term projects and lack long-term vision.
- Work with Amtrak to extend more of the regional trains that currently stop in Washington into Virginia.
- Support an adequate, sustained federal funding commitment to Amtrak. Virginia's regional trains cannot operate—and certainly cannot expand—without funding of the Amtrak system, particularly the Northeast Corridor.
- Study the potential of a Virginia Rail Authority to help ensure continuity of policies and investments and provide a mechanism for ownership of assets funded by Virginia's taxpayers.
- Develop and apply more rigorous metrics to assess the costs and benefits of alternative improvements to expand and enhance Virginia's regional train network, and improve documentation of the benefits provided by investments made (including energy savings, economic benefits, and pollution reduction).
- Ensure that potential rail alternatives are adequately considered before future investments in a major new or expanded highway project are made.

In the past five years, passenger rail ridership has exploded, and Virginia has emerged as a national leader in innovative ways to support and enhance intercity passenger rail. Now we must make smart investments, adopt needed policies, and secure additional resources to increase and enhance the capacity of our rail lines. These steps will enable us to advance fast, frequent, and reliable rail service that can provide a more efficient, more convenient, and less polluting option for growing our economy and keeping our citizens moving.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Daniel Plaugher
Virginians for High Speed Rail
 (804) 864-5193
 VHSR@vhsrc.com

Trip Pollard
Southern Environmental Law Center
 (804) 343-1090
 tpollard@selcva.org

Endnotes are available online at
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