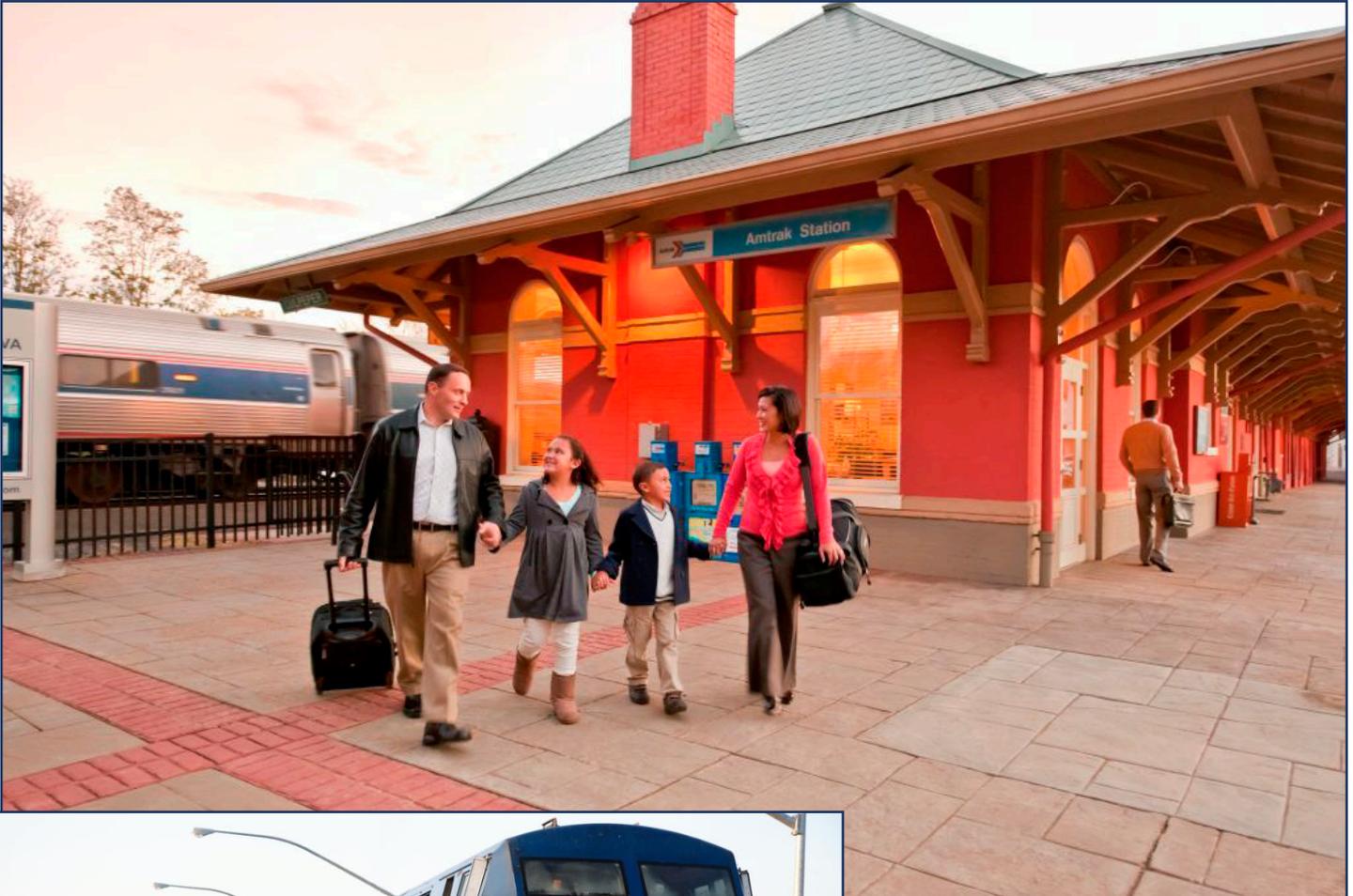


THE CASE FOR
VIRGINIA'S REGIONAL TRAINS
Funding Passenger Rail



Record Demand for Passenger Rail

Ridership on Virginia’s intercity and commuter rail services are climbing at record paces. Amtrak ridership in Virginia exceeded 1.3 million trips for the first time in fiscal year 2011, as ridership grew by 15.3 percent over the previous year.¹ In fact, Virginia had two of the three state-supported rail lines with the greatest ridership increase in the entire country last year, and the best performing state supported route in Amtrak’s system over the last two years.

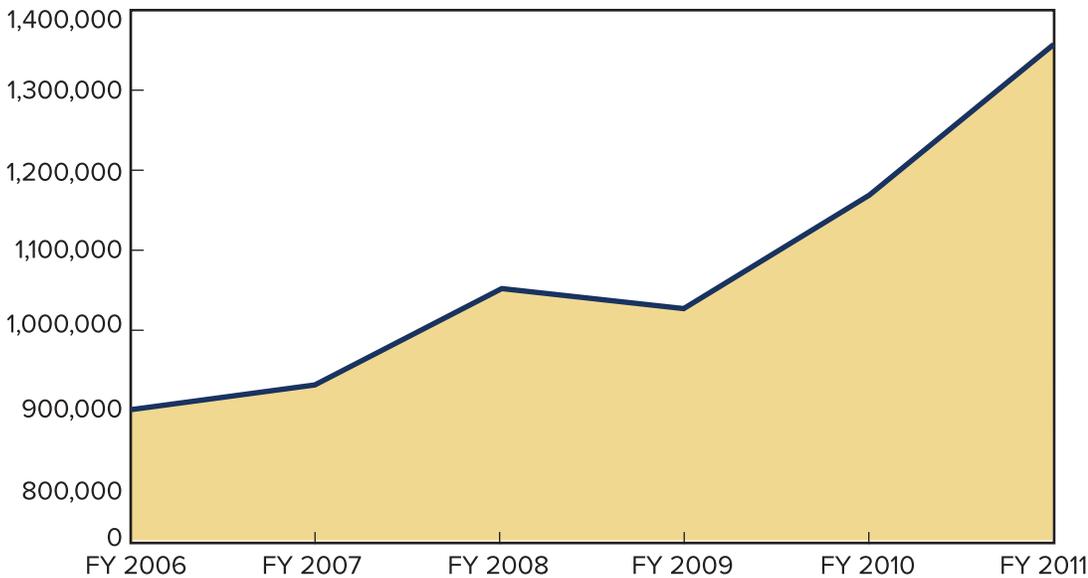
DID YOU KNOW?

50%

Amount Amtrak’s ridership has grown over the last five years

Demand for passenger rail has been steadily increasing. Overall, Amtrak ridership in Virginia increased by 50 percent over the last five years.

Amtrak Ridership in Virginia



In addition, ridership on the Commonwealth’s commuter rail service, Virginia Railway Express or VRE, grew by 12 percent between FY 2010 and FY 2011.² VRE’s top-ten days of highest ridership all occurred in 2011, and it exceeded 20,000 passengers daily for the first time in its 20 year history.

The bottom line is that passenger rail is an essential part of Virginia’s transportation system, and people and businesses want more passenger rail service.

Current Service and Recent Investments

Together Virginia and Amtrak operate six roundtrip regional, intercity trains. These trains represent 66 percent of all the Amtrak service in the Commonwealth and connect 67 percent of all Virginians with reliable, affordable, and efficient transportation alternatives.

Each of these regional trains connects to Washington, D.C. and to the Northeast Corridor.

Amtrak operates two roundtrip regional trains between Henrico’s Staples Mill Station, Washington, and the Northeast corridor, two roundtrips from Newport News to the Northeast corridor that also serve Downtown Richmond and Williamsburg, and a connection bus that extends from Newport News to Norfolk and Virginia Beach. Virginia does not currently pay for any of these services.

In recent years, Virginia has begun adding more regional service through a partnership with Amtrak. The Lynchburg Service was launched along the

Piedmont Corridor in 2009, and serves the communities of Lynchburg, Charlottesville, Culpeper, Manassas, Burke Centre, and Alexandria. In 2011, Virginia implemented a connector bus between Lynchburg and downtown Roanoke that feeds into this service.

Virginia and Amtrak partnered again in 2010 to extend another roundtrip

regional train along the I-95 corridor, serving the Henrico, Ashland, Fredericksburg, Quantico, Woodbridge, and Alexandria.

Further, Virginia, Amtrak, Norfolk Southern, and CSX are currently working in partnership to extend a roundtrip regional service from Richmond to Petersburg and Norfolk. This will reconnect Norfolk by passenger rail for the first time since 1977.



Benefits

Passenger rail offers multiple benefits. Among other things, it can help reduce congestion on our roads and in our airways, lower vulnerability to rising and volatile fossil fuel prices, increase our independence from foreign oil, increase employee productivity, revitalize communities and stimulate development around stations, and curb air and water pollution.

An asphalt-centered transportation approach is insufficient. Even with billions of dollars spent on building new capacity on our roads and interstates, Virginia's major metropolitan areas are some of the most congested regions in the country (Washington/Northern Virginia is ranked 1st, Hampton Roads 26th, and Richmond 64th),³ and the average commuter living along the Washington to Hampton Roads corridor spends 216 hours annually commuting to work or sitting in traffic. Flying is not that much better. The average delayed flight out of airports in Virginia's largest areas departs 64.7 minutes late.⁴ With the population in Virginia expected to grow by another two million residents over the next twenty years, resulting in potentially even more traffic and congestion on our roads and in our skies, we need more transportation choices.

These are just some of the factors that have led many decision-makers, businesses, and individuals to support greater passenger rail. Increased passenger rail capacity also can help create jobs and maximize the energy efficiency and competitiveness of Virginia's economy, especially in corridors where additional highway projects would be prohibitively expensive and/or harm our communities and our environment.

Expanding Passenger Rail Service

A number of studies have been conducted or are underway to advance additional rail services. Among other things, three different high speed rail corridors are currently being studied. The Commonwealth and the federal government are conducting the Tier 2 environmental impact statement (EIS) to improve the Richmond to Washington corridor to permit faster and more frequent service, a study is underway in cooperation with North Carolina to complete the Tier 2 EIS for high speed rail between Richmond and Raleigh, and the Tier I EIS for high speed rail between Richmond and Hampton Roads is being finalized. If Virginia and North Carolina, in conjunction with the VA/NC High Speed Rail Compact, recently chaired by Senator John Watkins, continue to build out their intercity rail as planned, this will create an estimated 228,000 jobs⁵ and generate \$30 billion in economic development.

Virginia is looking at other possible extensions of passenger rail service. For example, the Commonwealth has launched a bus connection between Roanoke and Lynchburg that enables people from the Roanoke region to board the Lynchburg regional service. Ridership on this bus service is exceeding projections, and this service is a precursor to extending regional passenger rail service to Roanoke and southwest Virginia.

The Funding Challenge

Funding is needed both to expand passenger rail service and to sustain the Commonwealth's regional trains, which serve as the backbone of Virginia's intercity and high speed passenger rail system.

This funding challenge became more difficult when Congress passed the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act in 2008, which mandates that Virginia take over the majority of the cost of the operation of four roundtrip Northeast Regional trains that Amtrak currently covers by October of 2013. This federal mandate will triple the amount of service that the Commonwealth is responsible for at the end of next year.

Over the next six years, Virginia needs \$119 million to continue the operation of its six roundtrip regional trains, and for passenger rail infrastructure improvements in the current plans. Virginia's regional trains are important for the future of the Commonwealth's intercity and high speed passenger rail program, and a stable source of funding is needed to keep them running. Additional funds are needed, however, to enhance and expand passenger rail service.

In 2010, the Virginia General Assembly, at the request of Senate Transportation Committee Chairwomen Yvonne Miller, asked the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation to study potential funding mechanisms for Virginia's intercity and high speed passenger rail system. The resulting study (Senate Document 14 of 2010) recommended creation of the Virginia Intercity Passenger Rail Operating and Capital Fund (IPROC), and outlined several funding mechanisms including increasing the car rental fee or diverting a small percentage of the transportation trust fund to IPROC. During the 2011 General Assembly session, Governor Bob McDonnell included the creation of IPROC in his transportation packed carried by Speaker William Howell in the Virginia House of Delegates and Senate President Pro Tempore Charles Colgan in the Virginia State Senate. The legislation passed with overwhelming bi-partisan support; however IPROC was not given a funding source.

DID YOU KNOW?

It will cost taxpayers up to \$300 million to reinstate Amtrak regional service if it is lost

How Can We Get There

The Commonwealth's passenger rail services take cars off the roads, free up capacity in our skies, and offer a range of valuable economic, health, and environmental benefits. However, we must put in place measures to ensure the continued operation of Virginia's regional trains, as well as the expansion of passenger rail.

We cannot afford to lose momentum at a time of record ridership. Moreover, we cannot afford to lose any of the existing Amtrak regional trains. As DRPT Director Thelma Drake recently stated, if one of these routes is lost, it is likely to cost taxpayers up to \$300 million to reinstate it.

At the very least, the General Assembly needs to support the short-term funding in the proposed FY 2012-13 biennial budget, and begin moving toward adopting a long-term, dedicated, and sustainable funding source for Virginia's regional trains.

The funding needed over the next two years for Virginia's regional trains accounts for less than 0.0003 percent of the Commonwealth's estimated \$85,000,000,000 budget.

This is an investment that is well worth making.

Endnotes

- ¹ Amtrak's FY 2011 Virginia Report: <http://www.amtrak.com/pdf/factsheets/VIRGINIA11.pdf>
- ² Virginia Railway Express FY 2011 Performance Measures presentation
- ³ David Schrank, Tim Lomax, Bill Eisele, 2011 Urban Mobility Study (Texas Transportation Institute, 2011)
- ⁴ Bureau of Transportation Statistics' Aviation On-Time Performance Database, Fiscal Year 2011 Airport Data
- ⁵ Virginia and North Carolina's 2009-2011 applications for funding from the Federal Intercity and High Speed Rail Program

Photos and Virginia map ©Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Daniel Plaugher

Virginians for High Speed Rail

(804) 864-5193

vhsrdc@earthlink.net

Trip Pollard

Southern Environmental Law Center

(804) 343-1090

tpollard@selcva.org