

Hearing set to discuss possible high-speed rail link

By TOM HOLDEN, The Virginian-Pilot

NORFOLK — The Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation will host a public hearing on Thursday to solicit opinions about improved passenger rail service to Hampton Roads.

Plans are under way to upgrade tracks between Washington and Richmond for the proposed Southeast High Speed Rail Corridor, which ultimately would link Washington to Charlotte.

Virginia has allocated \$67 million toward the track improvements, but the amount is far short of the estimated \$370 million needed for that link alone.

An environmental impact statement on the Southeast rail corridor, which is expected to be finished this fall, must be completed before engineering can begin.

Project advocates have said the high-speed service could begin as early as 2010.

But how Hampton Roads will be connected to the network remains uncertain, and the hearing at the Chesapeake Central Library will help planners gauge opinion on the two routes being considered. No money has been set aside for the Hampton Roads link.

High-speed rail is generally defined as involving trains that travel 90 mph and above. Depending on money and geography, a line out of Richmond may not always qualify as high-speed, so planners sometimes call the link “higher-speed” rail.

One would have the trains leave Richmond, head south to Petersburg, and then on to South Hampton Roads via Suffolk and Chesapeake. This route generally follows U.S. 460 and U.S. 58. and has been projected to cost about \$240 million just for improvements to the tracks.

The second option under discussion would have the train leave Richmond and use the existing Amtrak route to Williamsburg and then Newport News. This route has been projected to cost about \$250 million to upgrade to higher-speed status.

All of the corridors under consideration use Richmond as the main hub. Hampton Roads business leaders have insisted that this region be included in the high-speed network, even if money for the projects remains scarce. They say the link is important to the area’s long-term economic health.

“It’s very much in the planning stages. There is no source of funding dedicated to this type of service now,” said Alan C. Tobias, manager of passenger rail programs for the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, which oversees Virginia’s rail networks.

The North Carolina Department of Transportation and the federal government are also involved in the Southeast rail corridor project.

“Our goal is to understand what people’s interests are,” Tobias said. “It’s sometimes hard to get people to pay attention because in the early stages it’s conceptual, but the input we get now will dictate how decisions get made.”