

# Working on the rails

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Here's one you probably missed: SB 413, the Rail Transportation Development Authority.

The legislation, approved by the Senate in the past General Assembly session, would have created an entity modeled after the Virginia Port Authority. It would have been responsible for identifying needed projects for both freight and passenger rail service, involving both new construction and improvement of existing lines. And, given approval of a statewide rail transportation plan, the authority would have been able to borrow money to pay for projects, with the loans to be paid with money raised by fees and surcharges on tickets and freight.

Now if you think rail service in Virginia is as good as it needs to be, you might oppose this legislation. Or, if you have a better idea, you might promote it as an alternative.

Perhaps that better idea will be revealed by someone in the House of Delegates during the 2005 session of the General Assembly, because it was the House Appropriations Committee that killed SB 413 in the past session. What a pity.

Virginia needs a rail authority. It is not a magic bullet to slay the state's transportation problems, but it would be a significant step toward improving our ability to move freight and people. It would provide a mechanism through which to raise and target revenue at specific projects.

The costs of such improvements are surprisingly low when compared to the costs of highway projects. For example, the latest estimate for the cost of a single project, the third crossing of Hampton Roads, is between \$2.5 billion and \$4 billion - and that proposal, from a private company, reflects a savings of \$1 billion from earlier estimates. Yet one rail advocacy group, the Virginia High Speed Rail Development Committee, estimates that for \$2.5 billion, substantial improvements could be made to multiple rail corridors, including those running from Washington to Richmond, from Richmond to Newport News, from Richmond to Norfolk through Petersburg, and along Interstate 81.

Let's be clear: Hampton Roads desperately needs a third crossing, but it makes no sense whatsoever for Virginia not to have a more aggressive, organized approach to improving rail when the costs of a substantial upgrade affecting the entire state are about the same or less than the cost of a single regional highway project. A rail authority is a necessary starting point.

Much more will be needed. The economics of transportation have to change. Why should people who want to move freight use rail if it's faster and cheaper to use trucks? They

shouldn't. But when rail is left to survive on its own while public policy subsidizes and encourages truck freight, does it make sense to complain about all the trucks on the road? No, it doesn't. They're there because "we the people" are acquiescing to a system that encourages the trucks to be there.

State Sen. John Edwards, D-Roanoke, is among those who understand the strong connection between improving rail freight hauling and making life easier on the highway for people in cars. He sponsored the legislation for the rail authority and also champions improving the rail line along I-81. That's the most expensive of the proposed rail projects, with a price tag of about \$1.6 billion, yet it's far less expensive than proposed changes to the interstate, which now carries about three times as much truck traffic as it was designed for, much of it going from the northeast down to the southwest, bringing precious little economic benefit to Virginia as it passes through.

This point should serve as a reminder of how transportation systems are connected: rail, ports, airports, highways. They need to work together, whether it's efficiently getting freight off a ship and onto a train or truck, or getting a person off an airplane and onto a train or into a car. As jammed as our highways are, as crazy as air travel can be, rail is the neglected stepchild of transportation.

What is the likelihood that Virginia will actually get serious about rail? Some folks are trying. Some are even optimistic enough to believe it's still possible to improve rail service in time to help move people to Jamestown to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the arrival of English settlers. Now that's really being optimistic. But if people were willing and able 400 years ago to get into tiny ships and sail across the Atlantic into the unknown, you'd think Virginia, working with private companies and inspired by a public sick of clogged roads, could find sufficient organizational and financial juice to have a decent rail system.

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