

Why Hampton Roads must be on the High-Speed Rail Corridor

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The Obama Administration's offer of \$8 billion in stimulus funds to pull high-speed rail plans off the shelf has brought to light an interesting fact. Some years ago Virginia officials did not include Hampton Roads in the plan for the Southeast High-Speed Rail Corridor (SEHSR) for reasons unknown but easy to divine: Seen from Richmond we don't amount to much. That attitude explains why we are set to become one of the very few and geo-strategically the most important large metro area in the U.S. that is not on a main line route in the national plan.

Having now heard our cry for consideration, the State has dusted off a separate plan that offers two lesser alternatives, both of which call only for spurs from the main SEHSR line to our region, and neither of which offers SEHSR quality of service.

We need to be an integral part of the main SEHSR system with the so-called Regional High-Speed Rail (also known as 110 mph) level of service. There are significant reasons why our region—as much as any other major metro area—deserves to be included in the SEHSR:

- We have the largest population of any metro area between Washington D.C. and Atlanta—much larger than Richmond, Raleigh, Durham, Greensboro, Winston-Salem, Spartanburg, Greenville, even larger than Charlotte, all of which are in the national plan.
- Hampton Roads is Virginia's port, third busiest in the East; it is the state's main tourism destination and arts capital; and it hosts the nation's largest military installations.
- As we provide much employment and tax revenue to the state, our economy deserves the best possible infrastructure—for the benefit of the state itself
- The decision on high-speed rail is one of those rare 100-year decisions where the die gets cast. To remain competitive with other metro areas, we dare not allow ourselves to be locked into a comparatively inferior infrastructure.

Railroad rights-of-way exist that make it feasible to provide our region with SEHSR main line service, in one of several ways:

- (A) By a loop off the main line from Richmond down the Peninsula and across the James on a rail and auto drawbridge to Suffolk, Weldon N.C. and Raleigh, with connecting feeder lines from Newport News and Norfolk, or
- (B) By a loop off the main line from Petersburg down the Southside to Suffolk, Weldon, and Raleigh, with a connecting line to Norfolk, and with an upgrade to the existing rail line on the Peninsula sufficient to achieve quality service and on-time-performance measures of 90 percent, or
- (C) Substituting either of the above routes for the presently approved main line segments between Richmond and Raleigh or Petersburg and Raleigh.

Alternative A or B can be added to the plan. Alternative C would alter the plan. But C is the way our main line service would probably have been designed if we had had the opportunity to participate in the planning process some years ago. One huge advantage of C would be the assurance that our piece would be built with the rest of the SEHSR rather than being left behind as we were with the interstate highway program. But now, though it would save construction money, amending the SEHSR plan would take an act of Congress—tough but not impossible if our leaders wanted to attempt it.

If they do seek an act of Congress to pursue Alternative C, or at least review the situation, they deserve our applause. In that case, my preference would be the Alternative A route. If, on the other hand, one of the Main Line Loop options (Alternative A or B above) is what is chosen as the best solution, then, again, I personally prefer the Alternative A route—it takes us to Richmond going North rather than through Petersburg; it gives the Peninsula top service; it keeps passengers off the Southside coal tracks that may enjoy increased freight business; and it provides a very useful third crossing without the expense of a tunnel.

We will hear objections, mainly these:

- It's too expensive. Response: If so, then the whole HSR scheme is too expensive. But main line quality of service is certainly no more costly if compared to the plans of other states. Our region pays more in transportation taxes than we get back. For the nation's benefit—because of our port and defense establishment—we should receive back our fair share.
- We won't have enough riders. Response: HSR is a passenger service, and we have not only the largest resident population of any metro area between Washington and Atlanta but also many tourist, port-related, defense-contractor, and military travelers, i.e., more potential riders than any other metro area on the SEHSR line. If we don't measure up, neither does any other metro area.
- The difference in travel time between conventional and high-speed service on a Petersburg-Norfolk spur is only 10 to 15 minutes. Response: True, if you are going only to Petersburg or Richmond. But our travelers go to and from D.C. and Raleigh and beyond. And travel time is only one consideration in comparing high-speed to proposed conventional service, including whether delay will be incurred by having to change trains to get onto the main line.
- The decision process will be slowed down. Response: Maybe the process *should* be slowed down. So far it has produced the wrong answer.
- The state's planning process for Hampton Roads is too far along to add alternatives. Response: Indeed it is late in the day, but SEHSR is still in the paperwork planning stage, and no funds have been committed to actual construction. The process and plan can be corrected.

And they should be. Otherwise the vision for our region's future will be irreparably diminished for generations to come. The Hampton Roads plan as it stands will adversely impact our region's potential, reputation, and national status for decades.

The question is not whether giving Hampton Roads SEHSR quality service can and should be done but whether our citizens and leaders have the will to get organized to make our case. The next state and federal decisions are imminent and time is short, but it's still not too late for a course correction.

Readers might want to join in urging our Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization to invite the state to put Hampton Roads on the main line.

Mr. Babcock is the retired chairman and CEO of First Virginia Bank-Hampton Roads and Vice Chairman of Future of Hampton Roads, Inc., which supports SEHSR quality service for Hampton Roads.

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