

TRANSPORTATION NEWS

Local leaders on rail input: Don't pass us by

No hearings on high speed rail line will be held in Hampton Roads

By Debbie Messina The Virginian-Pilot

Hampton Roads leaders are miffed that no public hearings are scheduled locally on a study released last week on a proposed high speed passenger train between Richmond and Raleigh, N.C.

Eight hearings will be held in July in Virginia and North Carolina along the 162-mile rail corridor. The closest are in Petersburg and Richmond.

Local officials say they worry that Hampton Roads could be bypassed as the nation's rail network grows under President Barack Obama's administration, similar to what happened when the interstate highway system was built 50 years ago.

"This is our moment to stand up and demand to be heard on rail issues," said Norfolk Mayor Paul Fraim, who has championed regional high speed rail efforts. "We're just not going to have some bureaucracy backburner the Hampton Roads issues."

State rail officials said the Federal Railroad Administration requires the hearings be held in the project corridor. The line is estimated to cost \$2.1 billion to \$2.3 billion.

Jennifer Pickett, spokeswoman for the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, said, "It's a completely open process." Hampton Roads residents can speak at any of the scheduled hearings, she said, and may submit comments in writing or on the website.

Meanwhile, the state wants to host an informational meeting for Hampton Roads, Pickett said. Details have not been set.

A connection to Hampton Roads has been designated by federal authorities as part of the Southeast High Speed Rail corridor. It's planned as a spur off the main line that would run from D.C. to Richmond and into North Carolina.

The Commonwealth Transportation Board in February endorsed routing the high speed rail line along Norfolk Southern freight tracks that parallel U.S. 460 into South Hampton Roads. It's estimated that the spur would cost at least \$475 million and would attract close to 1 million passengers annually.

Studies for the connection are a step behind the Richmond-to-Raleigh line.

"There's going to be competition for scarce dollars, and we need to be at the table," Fraim said.

He added that local leaders plan to "kick open some doors to make sure we are heard. ... We are not going to be disregarded any longer in these discussions."

Ray Taylor, president of Future Hampton Roads, a regional think tank, said, "We're either in the game, or we take what somebody else decides and it may be short of optimum benefits to our region."

At a hearing sponsored by the state in January, more than 500 Hampton Roads residents packed the Half Moone Cruise and Celebration Center in Norfolk in support of a high speed rail connection along U.S. 460.

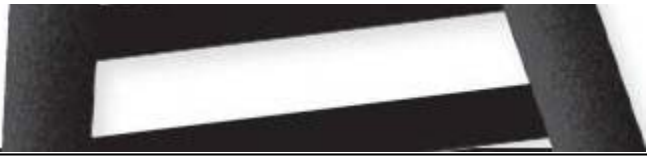
The enthusiasm prompted the state to work on establishing, within three years, conventional passenger service along the route that could later be upgraded to high speed rail. The state's draft of the road and transit budget that will be voted on later this month includes the full cost of that project – \$93 million.

On Thursday, the draft environmental statement on the Richmond-to-Raleigh segment was released after eight years of study. It's part of an overall plan extending the current high speed service, now operating from Boston to Washington, south to Virginia, the Carolinas and ultimately to Florida.

The Richmond-to-Raleigh portion includes nearly 100 new bridges or overpasses that will create a fully grade-separated system. The trains would have top speeds of 110 mph with average speeds of 85-87 mph.

Debbie Messina, (757) 446-2588, debbie.messina@pilotonline.com





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