

Norfolk passenger rail service to begin by Dec. 31

Amtrak passenger trains from Norfolk's Harbor Park to Richmond and beyond will begin rolling nearly a year earlier than planned, by Dec. 31, Gov. Bob McDonnell announced Wednesday.

Service wasn't expected to start until October 2013, but work to prepare Norfolk Southern and CSX tracks for passenger rail has progressed faster than expected, said Thelma Drake, Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation director.

"We're excited about it and want people to know about it," Drake said, adding that she's often quizzed by skeptical residents about whether the service will actually launch.

The state is spending \$101 million to upgrade the freight corridors between Norfolk and Petersburg and Richmond.

Service will start with one train departing and one arriving daily. The morning departure is set for around 5 a.m., with service to Richmond's Staples Mill station by 7 a.m., and on to Washington by 9 a.m. A train will depart Washington around 3 p.m., arriving in Norfolk by 7 p.m. Officials designed the schedule to be attractive to military and business officials who make day trips to the capital area.

The one-seat service will carry riders all the way to Boston. Officials plan to increase service to three round-trips daily. It will be the first intercity passenger rail service in Norfolk since 1977.

"This service will provide immediate relief to road weary travelers between two of the state's most congested regions," McDonnell said in a news release. "This service is long overdue and I congratulate our partners and commend their cooperation in moving up the scheduled start date."

The accelerated schedule, however, means that passengers might have to use a temporary kiosk or trailer for ticketing while the city builds a \$3 million, 4,000-square-foot train station.

John Keifer, public works director, said the station has been designed and the city is poised to advertise for bids in the next couple months with construction starting in the spring.

"The objective is to get it done by the time the trains start operating, but I don't know if we'll have it done by then or not," he said.

Drake said completing the station will not delay the train's startup.

While there's no money to cover operating expenses now, McDonnell's proposed budget includes more than \$25 million over two years for Virginia's state-sponsored rail routes. The money will support the upcoming Norfolk train as well as service to Washington from Richmond and from Lynchburg.

Drake, however, is confident that the popularity of the Norfolk trains will rival the Lynchburg service, which sells enough tickets to avoid tapping the state subsidy.

"Amtrak expects it to be very well used and that it should pay its operating costs," she said.

About 44,000 residents from South Hampton Roads travel to Newport News each year to catch a train. Amtrak's early estimates show about 67,000 customers will use the Norfolk service annually, or close to 200 daily passengers.

Drake said Amtrak has not set prices and is working on a passenger-and-revenue analysis. However, Norfolk officials have said a one-way ticket to Washington will cost \$50 to \$60.

Amtrak service from Newport News to Washington generally costs \$33 to \$46, and the trip time is four to four and a half hours.

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