

TRANSPORTATION NEWS

TRAIN TO LINK NORFOLK TO RICHMOND IN 3 YEARS

Commonwealth board OKs funding for passenger service north from Harbor Park

By Debbie Messina

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IN THREE YEARS, travelers will be able to board an Amtrak train at Harbor Park in Norfolk and ride to Richmond and beyond for the first time in more than three decades.

When it signed off on its six-year building plan Wednesday, the Commonwealth Transportation Board approved \$93 million to reestablish passenger rail in South Hampton Roads.

Since passenger rail in South Hampton Roads ended in 1977, the closest trains are across the harbor in Newport News.

Under the plan, Norfolk Southern's tracks that roughly parallel U.S. 460 and CSX's tracks from Petersburg to Richmond will be upgraded to accommodate one passenger train a day running at conventional speeds of up to 79 mph. Fares have not been set.

The region's enthusiasm for higher-speed rail, which would run at speeds of up to 110 mph, prompted the state to work on conventional service that could later be upgraded to high-speed rail. Officials have said it could be many years before higher-speed service comes to Hampton Roads because it requires separate passenger- and freight-train tracks.

Earlier state studies that route conventional trains from South Hampton Roads to Main Street station in downtown Richmond indicate the ride would take one hour and 38 minutes. However, the Richmond stop will not be at the Main Street station but at the suburban Staples Mill station in Henrico County north of Richmond, which is Amtrak's busiest in the state.

A downtown stop would cost six times more, the state estimates.

While not ideal, Hampton Roads officials are satisfied with the Staples Mill plan as a first step to service. Eventually, they would like the trains to stop downtown.

"It's absolutely vital that we eventually get to downtown Richmond," Norfolk Mayor Paul Fraim said. "But we've got to get the thing going. Or else it's going to be a decade before we get anything else."

Fraim said most passengers will continue to Washington and beyond.

Richmond officials also want the trains to stop downtown, which the city is trying to develop as a multi-modal transportation center. Amtrak's Newport News trains approach from the east and stop at the Main Street and Staples Mill stations.

The long-term goal for both Norfolk and Richmond is a "City Center to City Center" link.

Norfolk wants to develop Harbor Park as a transportation center for connecting passenger rail, light rail and buses.

"We have to take an incremental approach," said Jennifer Pickett, Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation spokeswoman. "The cost of the improvements to the Richmond Main Street station is significant. The

people in Hampton Roads and Richmond want more options now.”

State rail officials estimate it will cost \$600 million to make improvements to the tracks that lead to the Main Street station when approaching from Petersburg to the south.

Those upgrades are part of the Southeast High-Speed Rail plan that will route faster trains from Washington to Richmond, Hampton Roads and North Carolina.

Now that the funding is in place, Pickett said the state will work out details with the freight railroads for making track improvements and with Amtrak for operating the service.

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