

Take the train to Richmond?

VA. PITCHES \$75M PLAN FOR PASSENGER SERVICE

By **Bill Sizemore**

The Virginian-Pilot

RICHMOND

With the prospect of high-speed rail at least six years off, state officials want to spend \$75 million on an intermediate step that they say could become reality in half that time: a conventional passenger train from Norfolk to Richmond.

Thelma Drake, director of the state Department of Rail and Public Transportation, told the Hampton Roads legislative caucus Thursday that the money would be spent on upgrading the existing Norfolk Southern tracks, now used solely by freight trains, for passenger service.

She said the train, with a top speed of 79 mph, could be in service within three years.

In an interview later, Drake said the state is still pursuing high-speed rail service, but that is a much more expensive proposition and depends on federal funding. In the meantime, she said, she believes there is a growing public appetite for an alternative to the automobile.

“There’s been a sea change,” said Drake, a former congresswoman from Hampton Roads. “The public and our elected officials have come to understand that we just can’t build enough roads. They want us to expand their transportation choices.”

When and if high-speed rail – at speeds up to 150 mph – becomes possible, she said, the existing track can be further upgraded to accommodate it.

Money for the conventional rail service would come from the Rail Enhancement Fund, an existing pool of state money that comes from a tax on rental cars. Under law, the fund can be used to finance 70 percent of rail projects, with the remaining 30 percent coming from railroad companies or other sources.

The state budget proposal approved Thursday by the House of Delegates contains a provision waiving the requirement for the 30 percent non-state contribution, allowing the state to pay for the entire project.

That provision is necessary, Drake said, because “there’s no foreseeable source for the 30 percent.” Norfolk Southern is not willing to contribute, she said, because the passenger service would not be profitable enough.

There is no similar language in the Senate budget plan, but Drake said she hopes the Senate will concur with the House as the two chambers resolve their differences. The project is also contingent on federal approval.

The \$75 million would pay only for track upgrades. Money would still need to be found for two stations, at Harbor Park in Norfolk – where the track would tie into the light-rail line now under construction – and at Bowers Hill in Chesapeake.

The service would be run by Amtrak, the national passenger rail operator. It would offer one round trip daily, with possible later expansion to three trains.

It would be the first passenger rail service from Norfolk since 1977. Amtrak runs two passenger trains daily from Newport News.

If the light-rail line under construction in Norfolk is eventually extended to the Virginia Beach Oceanfront, Drake said, “This would let you leave Washington or New York for a beach vacation and never get in a car. It’s very exciting.”

Bill Sizemore, (804) 697-1560,

bill.sizemore@pilotonline.com