

TIME TO PREPARE FOR HIGH-SPEED RAIL

THE ISSUE A setback shouldn't stall the effort. WHERE WE STAND Future opportunities require the preparation and leadership lacking in recent years.

VIRGINIA'S high-speed rail strategy thus far has been to hope that the state's geography would make up for its lack of preparation and leadership. Last week, the state learned that geography isn't enough.

Virginia's request for \$1.8 billion in federal stimulus funding to develop high-speed rail from Washington to Petersburg was rejected, even though that stretch is essential to long-term plans to connect the nation's existing high-speed train service — between D.C. and Boston — to population centers in Charlotte and Atlanta.

The timing of the news added to the frustration, coming on the same day that nearly 1,000 people crowded into Norfolk's Half Moone Cruise and Celebration Center to support efforts to extend high-speed rail service from Petersburg to Norfolk. The so-called Hampton Roads spur has little hope of attracting federal funds as long as the north-south corridor parallel to Interstate 95 remains in limbo.

President Obama's scattershot approach to high-speed rail is partly at fault for the confusion. The administration dribbled dollars across 31 states rather than targeting funds in a coherent expansion of existing infrastructure.

But Virginia must accept some responsibility. North Carolina spent years developing its proposal, which paid off with \$520 million to boost train speeds to 90 mph between Raleigh and Charlotte.

Geography is still on Virginia's side. Folks in the Research Triangle will eventually get fidgety for quick trips to Washington and New York. Virginia stands between them and those destinations. Now is the time to start putting preparation and leadership to work to build a case for high-speed rail in Virginia. Here are a few steps to get the state started:

First, the Commonwealth Transportation Board should endorse a high-speed rail corridor between Petersburg and Norfolk. More than 1 million people in South Hampton Roads have no convenient access to rail service, and the enthusiastic crowd at last week's hearing demonstrates an untapped market.

Second, state leaders must stop stalling and face the need to earmark revenues for capital and operating expenses. It's a tough topic to raise when a backlog of highway projects remains unaddressed. But if Virginia wants to be a player in high-speed rail, it will have to pay a share of the costs.

Finally, state leaders should pursue a partnership with Norfolk Southern Corp. to provide passenger rail to South Hampton Roads. The company estimates rail upgrades between Petersburg and Norfolk could be accomplished for as little as \$75 million.

Hampton Roads is fortunate to have a friend working on these difficult but crucial issues. Former delegate and congresswoman Thelma Drake is the new director of the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation.

The Norfolk Republican has a well-earned reputation for hard work and persistence. Her job is made more difficult by last week's setback and by the minimal resources at her disposal.

But she has a trainload of hometown rail advocates rooting for her.

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