

Amtrak ticket sales performing as expected

NORFOLK

Ridership numbers for the city's new Amtrak service have been coming in right on schedule since passenger train service returned to South Hampton Roads in December after a 35-year absence.

The Norfolk-to-Washington line - including its stops between Richmond and Union Station - served 58,226 passengers from January to May. That's slightly more than the 58,160 people the national rail operator assumed in its budget for that time.

Another 13,766 rode in June, according to Amtrak.

About a third of the travelers are getting on or off in Norfolk. The line served 73,126 passengers from December to May, and about 22,382 of them boarded or stepped off at the Norfolk platform by Harbor Park, said Kevin Page, chief operating officer for the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation.

Ticket revenue on the line nearly is covering the cost of its operation, Page said. In April, for example, revenues covered 97 percent of expenses, he said.

Bringing Amtrak to South Hampton Roads cost \$114 million in state money to pay for the necessary track upgrades along a freight corridor between Norfolk and Petersburg. Service started in mid-December, 10 months ahead of schedule.

Track and crossing improvements along the route have continued since then. That work soon will allow Amtrak to let the weekday Norfolk train leave slightly later in the morning. Departures will move to 5 a.m. from 4:50 a.m. beginning July 29, said Lynne McCarthy, a spokeswoman for the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transit.

Page said he hopes additional upgrades by the end of this year will allow them to push the weekday departure time to 5:05 a.m.

Amtrak's passenger statistics for the Newport News-to-Washington line suggest a significant number of Norfolk's new riders would otherwise be riding from the Peninsula. Ridership on the line fell to about 226,000 between January and May, from 246,000 during the same period last year.

State officials won't see more station-specific figures until later this year, Page said.

Construction also continues on a 3,500-square-foot train station at Harbor Park. Work on the \$3 million building is slated to be finished this summer, according to the city's website.

The city initially said it would charge \$5 per day for parking but has not begun the fee. City staffers will evaluate whether parking fees would generate enough revenue to justify the costs involved with setting up an automated system after the station opens, city spokeswoman Lori Crouch said.

The city parks about eight to 10 vehicles per day during the week and 15 to 18 vehicles on weekend days in the lot that serves the train, Crouch said by email.

Additional track and infrastructure upgrades are needed to bring second and third daily trains to Norfolk. Exactly what improvements need to be made and how much the state should contribute to the upgrades under negotiation with track owner CSX, Page said.

The state's six-year transportation funding plan, boosted by revenue from tax increases approved this winter, includes \$80 million for track improvements for the additional Norfolk trains.

So far, the ridership numbers for the Norfolk line appear average to Robbyn Gayer, a high-speed rail advocate and director of Hampton Roads for Rail. They're not so low that they'll generate a backlash from the public, and not so high that they'll cause much excitement, he said.

Gayer said he worries that a ho-hum performance of the Norfolk Amtrak line will lull leaders and others into complacency and reduce demand for the more costly improvements necessary for higher-speed trains. Only by going faster will rail service tap what Gayer said is its potential to serve many times more passengers than it does today.

Page said state officials must focus first on producing a reliable regional service while also dealing with a coming Oct. 1 deadline in which Virginia must take over from Amtrak the responsibility of paying for its six regional trains.

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