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BREAKING

Virginia has \$3.7 billion deal to expand rail service between Richmond and Washington

BY MICHAEL MARTZ Richmond Times-Dispatch
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Passengers leave the train at rear, while an employee walks alongside a southbound Amtrak train at the Staples Mill station on Wednesday, Dec. 19, 2019.

JOE MAHONEY

Trains will run almost every hour between Washington and Richmond - including Main Street Station downtown - within 10 years under a deal between Virginia and CSX Corp. that will open the gateway for expanded rail service in the region and other parts of the state.

The blockbuster \$3.7 billion agreement that Gov. Ralph Northam and CSX announced on Thursday will give Virginia control over hundreds of miles of railroad track and underlying right-of-way in three rail corridors, including the former RF&P line that parallels Interstate 95 between Richmond and Washington. It will not expand the two-track rail line that runs through Ashland, which the state already has promised to preserve.

“We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make our rail system work better for everyone, both in Virginia and along the entire East Coast,” Northam said at the Crystal City headquarters of JBG Smith, the real estate company that helped Virginia land Amazon's new East Coast headquarters in Arlington County last year.

“This agreement will change the future of transportation in Virginia, improving our ability to move people and goods across the state, and opening up potential rail service in under-served parts of the commonwealth,” he said.

Virginia will send \$525 million to CSX, based in Jacksonville, Fla., for right-of-

way and existing track on three rail lines.

The agreement will allow the state to build and own track for high-speed passenger rail service, including expansion of Long Bridge, a 115-year-old railroad bridge across the Potomac River that is critical to passenger and freight service along the Eastern Seaboard but operating at near full capacity.

“CSX is proud of the innovative agreement reached with the commonwealth of Virginia which will advance our goals for increased safety, efficiency, and volume growth while meeting the public’s desire for more passenger rail service to relieve commuter traffic congestion in the I-95 corridor,” CSX President and CEO Jim Foote said Thursday.

More daily service from Amtrak

Virginia also has an agreement with Amtrak, which would allow the addition of six regional trains for daily service between Richmond and Washington, including one next year, more than doubling capacity and allowing trains to depart almost every hour. The expanded capacity also would allow additional train service to Norfolk next year and Newport News by 2026.

Currently, five regional trains serve Staples Mill Road Station in Henrico County but only two stop at Main Street Station in Shockoe Bottom because of the current track layout. An additional four long-distance trains stop at Staples Mill in runs between the Northeast and Southeast. State officials say those trains also could serve Main Street Station with additional rail improvements.

“Offering new options means you won’t have to drive on I-95,” said Danny Plaughter, executive director of Virginians for High Speed Rail.

According to the state rail advocacy group, the project is estimated to create a 2.6 million increase in annual ridership and generate about \$370 million in annual economic benefit.

“I think this is a historic day for Virginia. I don’t say that lightly,” he said. “We haven’t owned a rail corridor in well over 30 years. So with taking ownership and having a stake in the corridor between Richmond and DC, it’s a very big deal.”

Amtrak intends to contribute \$944 million to the project, which also would be financed by the state and regional partners, including the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission and Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission, co-owners of the Virginia Railway Express commuter service.

“Amtrak is thrilled to be supporting this game-changing rail investment program as an investor and partner,” said Stephen Gardner, senior executive vice president and chief operating and commercial officer for the national rail corporation. “This program is a model for the nation of how to grow passenger and freight service together in order to relieve congestion, protect our environment, and enhance mobility.”

The agreement with CSX, to be completed by the end of next year, will give Virginia control of 350 miles of railroad right-of-way and 225 miles of existing track. The package includes half of the 112 miles of right-of-way and 39 miles of track that CSX owns between Richmond and Washington.

The deal also includes: passenger train rights to 30 miles of track between Richmond and Petersburg; 75 miles of right-of-way on the abandoned S-Line between Petersburg and Ridgeway, N.C., to eventually allow high-speed rail service to the Southeast; and 173 miles of right-of-way and 186 miles of track on the Buckingham Branch Line between Doswell and Clifton Forge for eventual cross-state passenger service.

"It allows us to be in a partnership to separate passenger and freight trains and be in control of our destiny," Secretary of Transportation Shannon Valentine said in an interview.

The deal also will help free CSX from the constraints of accommodating both freight and rail service on the same tracks, Valentine said. "They're expanding their capacity and we're expanding ours. It's a true win-win."

State transportation officials say the project would relieve traffic gridlock on I-95 at one-third the cost of adding a new lane to the interstate and allow a major expansion of commuter rail service in Northern Virginia, including additional trains through Manassas that would siphon rush-hour traffic away from the heavily traveled Interstate 66 west of Washington.

The cost of the project would be split roughly three ways between Virginia, Amtrak and regional partnerships, but would not require any new state money, state officials said.

The agreement envisions contributions from Amtrak, use of state funds from its existing partnership with the federal government on the Atlantic Gateway project in the I-95 corridor, and regional toll revenues from the I-66 expansion inside the Capital Beltway. The project would require authorization of bonds, but not for tax-supported debt.

"There are no new state revenue resources," said Jennifer Mitchell, director of the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation. "We're maximizing the revenue resources we have in rail."

Virginia officials say it's a cost-effective approach to relieving highway congestion for both the state and region. It will allow the addition of five daily trains by the Virginia Railway Express between Spotsylvania County and Union Station in Washington. It also will allow four additional trains on the Manassas Line between Union Station and Broad Run in Prince William County.

The project will increase the capacity of VRE by 75%, allowing trains to run on 15-minute intervals in peak hours and add service on weekends.

“Expansion of the Long Bridge will enable us to grow VRE service to include new riders, new hours, and new weekend service - in short, to improve the quality of life and economic opportunities for tens of thousands more Northern Virginians,” VRE Operations Board Chairwoman Katie Cristol said.

In contrast, a state study estimates that adding one lane to I-95 for 52 miles between Springfield in Fairfax County to Thornburg in Spotsylvania would cost \$12.5 billion but wouldn't significantly relieve long-term rush-hour traffic congestion on the day it would open.

"We've just got to move away from a transportation system so heavily concentrate on adding asphalt - we can't afford it," said Trip Pollard, senior attorney for community and land planning at the Southern Environmental Law Center.

"We have got to be providing more transportation choices and they have to be cleaner," Pollard said.

Expansion of the VRE Manassas line also would divert traffic away from I-66, which is why state officials are working with the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission to devote a portion of new toll revenues to the

project. Additional rail service on the line is subject to negotiation with Norfolk Southern Corp., which owns a portion of the track, but state officials say the CSX agreement is the first critical step.

The key to the entire project is expansion of Long Bridge, an unglamorous but sturdy two-track bridge across the Potomac between Arlington and Washington. CSX owns the bridge and corridor, but the agreement will allow Virginia to build and own a parallel two-track bridge that already is under environmental review for construction just upriver from the existing crossing.

The new bridge will be devoted to passenger service, with a separate span for bicycles and other pedestrians, allowing CSX to use the existing crossing solely for freight service that is critical to state commerce, especially to and from the Port of Virginia.

Under the plan, Virginia will build and own separate tracks for passenger service between Alexandria and L'Enfant Station in Washington. It also will build a rail bypass or flyover near Springfield and Franconia to allow passenger trains to cross from the east side of the rail line to the west to cross the new Long Bridge.

Virginia plans to build the project in three phases:

- The first adds four miles of new track from Franconia south to Lorton by 2024;
- The second, to be completed by 2026, adds 19 miles of new track, including the flyover in Fairfax and a third track in Hanover County north of Ashland that would serve as a siding for coordinating rail traffic;
- The third, scheduled through by 2030, includes the new Long Bridge, which state officials say could be completed by 2028.

Dominion Energy CEO Tom Farrell and other business leaders in the Greater Washington Partnership say the announcement should lead to negotiation with other potential partners to further expand rail service among the jurisdictions in the region extending from Richmond to Baltimore. Those partners could include Maryland, which they said could extend its MARC regional commuter rail service into Northern Virginia over the new Long Bridge.

"This is one of the biggest achievements for passenger rail in the United States since Amtrak was created almost 50 years ago," Farrell and two other co-chairmen of the partnership's regional mobility initiative said in a written statement.

"We commend Governor Northam and his team for their vision, leadership and execution of this historic effort."

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