

Statement of Shannon Valentine
Secretary of Transportation, Commonwealth of Virginia
Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials
House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee
March 10, 2021

“Full Steam Ahead for Rail: Why Rail Is More Relevant than Ever
for Economic and Environmental Progress”

Chairman Payne and Members of the Rail Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Commonwealth of Virginia and our \$3.7 billion Transforming Rail in Virginia initiative. Under this program, the Commonwealth will construct a \$1.9 billion bridge over the Potomac dedicated to passenger rail, acquire 386 miles of rail right-of-way and 223 miles of track, and invest an additional \$1 billion in rail infrastructure projects over the next decade. Our purpose in doing so is to expand and improve passenger, commuter, and freight rail service, establish a pathway to separate passenger and freight operations, and create a vital link in our national rail network by connecting the Northeast and Southeast corridors.

It was an honor to be with Governor Northam to announce this innovative partnership with CSX, Amtrak, and Virginia Railway Express (VRE) in December 2019. Over these past 14 months, the Commonwealth has worked diligently and deliberately to finalize the definitive agreements, environmental permits, and legislative requirements to complete this multilateral initiative. And today, I am pleased to report to this Committee that we are in the final hours of completing this work.

Background

I believe it would be helpful for this Committee to understand **WHY** Virginia is investing in rail. Simply put, Governor Northam and our Administration have prioritized projects that will move as many people and goods as possible across all modes of transportation in an equitable, environmentally sustainable manner, with a focus on job retention and creation.

This is a multimodal approach for creating an economy that works for all people -- which is why Virginia supported HR 2, the Moving Forward Act, and its new Passenger Rail Improvement, Modernization, and Expansion (PRIME) grants. These grants would provide \$19 billion over 5 years for passenger rail improvement and expansion projects. We believe these grants should be administered in a manner similar to FTA's 5309 Capital Investment Grant Program so that larger projects or a program of projects could receive multi-year, full-funding grant agreements to match significant state and local investments, allowing states to properly plan for large-scale intercity passenger rail projects.

Before I became Secretary of Transportation, I had the privilege of serving in the Virginia General Assembly and on the Commonwealth Transportation Board. I saw first-hand the growth in all modes of transportation across Virginia – highways, transit, rail, ports, and aviation. I had the opportunity to lead the legislative effort to launch the first state-supported Amtrak train in 2009 anchored in Lynchburg, Virginia – a pilot that has now expanded to 6 trains and 4 routes – Richmond, Newport News, Norfolk, and Roanoke – all connecting to Washington, DC, and the Northeast Corridor.

How did we get here?

One of the worst rail bottlenecks along the East Coast is at the Potomac River crossing between Virginia and Washington, DC, which is called the Long Bridge. The two-track Long Bridge was built in 1904 and reinforced in 1942. The bridge and tracks on both sides of the Potomac are owned by CSX railroad. The bridge carries all passenger, commuter, and freight trains along the corridor, including the North Carolina state-supported service and five long-distance routes.

The construction of a new, two-track Long Bridge is the centerpiece of our Transforming Rail in Virginia capital investments. The current bridge is the only rail connection linking the Southeast and the Northeast, with the closest rail bridge being more than 70 miles away (as the crow flies), carrying nearly 80 trains a day with capacity at 98 percent during peak hours. This constrains Amtrak and VRE from adding more trains to accommodate passenger demand which, prior to the pandemic, was reaching record highs. In 2019, VRE was averaging more than 19,000 trips a week, and Amtrak carried nearly 1 million riders on our state-supported routes – a 680 percent increase since the inception of this service in 2009. While this momentum was interrupted by the pandemic, a recent Greater Washington Partnership survey indicated that, while 58 percent of the region's employers have implemented full-time telework, only one percent expect their employees to continue to work remotely full time once we emerge from the pandemic. With current traffic on our highways nearing pre-pandemic levels, we believe we are presenting a solution for today and for generations to come. However, without a second Long Bridge, the Commonwealth would not be able to grow its current service or expand to new areas.

To allow the entire rail network to operate efficiently, we are also making investments south of the bridge to improve reliability and create a path for separating passenger and freight rail – a four-track corridor north of Alexandria, a third-track corridor north of Lorton, including a bypass at Franconia, and six additional sidings – all to resolve conflicts along the rail network. While this initial scope (Phases 1 and 2 on the attached map) does not provide for a complete dedicated track separation, our ultimate long-term goal is to identify partners and seek funding to complete a four-track corridor from Washington to Richmond, with two tracks dedicated to passenger trains and two to freight trains.

Corridor Planning Studies

Since 2018, the Commonwealth has engaged in corridor planning studies that analyze all modes of transportation across the north-south I-81 and I-95 corridors as well as the east-west I-64 and

I-66 corridors. As most know all too well, the I-95 corridor is heavily congested. Even today, as we emerge from this pandemic, traffic has returned to 90 percent of pre-pandemic levels. Prior to the pandemic, on a daily basis, cars and buses carried more than 350,000 people, trucks carried more than 271,000 tons of freight, trains carried 83,000 tons of freight, and Metro, VRE, and Amtrak trains carried more than 112,000 passengers through this corridor.

The I-95 Study analyzed many potential improvements to this critical corridor. It found that widening I-95 by one lane in each direction for 50 miles would cost \$12.5 billion. While the cost was staggering, the most sobering part of the analysis was that by the time construction was completed in 10 years, the corridor would be just as congested as it is today. That finding is what led Virginia to rail – a mode of transportation that could provide the additional capacity along the corridor at a third of the cost. With a willing partner in CSX, we joined together in thinking outside of the box and discussions began. As these discussions continued, we reached out to Amtrak and VRE to join us in the unique opportunity I am presenting to you today.

Transforming Rail in Virginia Program: Passenger and Commuter Rail

Virginia negotiated improvements with CSX to increase service levels. These improvements will be phased in over 10 years, resulting in:

- Double Virginia-supported Amtrak trains;
- Provide nearly hourly Amtrak service between Richmond and Washington, DC;
- Increase VRE commuter service by 60 percent along the I-95 Corridor, with 15-minute intervals during peak periods, and introduce weekend service;
- Increase Amtrak service to Newport News and allow for an improved schedule for a third Amtrak train to Norfolk;
- Lay the foundation for Southeast High Speed Rail through the acquisition of an abandoned S-line which runs from Petersburg into North Carolina;
- Preserve the existing Buckingham Branch freight corridor between Doswell and Clifton Forge for future east-west passenger service;
- And create the potential to expand rail service to all parts of our Commonwealth, including Southwest Virginia, that can now be unlocked by the construction of a new Long Bridge across the Potomac.

Transforming Rail in Virginia: Freight Rail

What is also transformative is that this initiative is being done in cooperation with the host freight railroad, as this agreement increases capacity, reliability, and fluidity for BOTH freight and passenger rail. Rather than increase passenger rail at the expense of throughput capacity for freight operators, we have worked collaboratively with CSX to create a “win-win” for both freight and passenger rail.

The rail industry generates more than \$73 billion in economic output to the Commonwealth each year. The Port of Virginia in the Hampton Roads region handles 4 million containers annually from all around the world. Currently, the Port moves more containers by rail – 35 percent – than any

other port along the East Coast. With a goal of increasing that movement to 40 percent, the construction of a new Long Bridge opens freight capacity on the existing bridge. Without this added capacity, freight trains alone in 2040 will experience more than 10 times the current delay.

Environmental Benefits

As we create infrastructure for passenger, commuter, and freight rail, we also are moving more goods and more people in an environmentally sustainable way. According to the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), rail travel emits up to 83 percent less greenhouse gases than driving and up to 73 percent less than flying. According to the Long Bridge Environmental Impact Statement, CSX is planning to expand from 18 trains per day now to 42 in 2040. For a company that moves one ton of freight 508 miles on a single gallon of gas, this provides four times the fuel savings and environmental benefits than moving freight on our highways.

The total truck Vehicle Miles Traveled – VMT – reduced by the Long Bridge project alone in the fifth year after construction is 482 million. VMT reduced for cars is 332 million in that fifth year. This results in a reduction of 66 million gallons of diesel fuel and 10 million gallons of gas in that year.

A cost-benefit analysis developed by consultant Kimley-Horn reveals that in that fifth year, the Commonwealth would experience environmental benefits in terms of:

- 474,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions avoided due to moving freight by rail, and
- 90,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions avoided due to passenger rail trips added,
- for a total value of avoided carbon emissions of 564,000 metric tons.

These are not cumulative statistics, but simply represent the environmental benefit in a single year.

Creating an Economy that Works for all People

The Long Bridge construction reaches beyond the benefits to the rail and road networks and the environment. A study by George Mason University estimates that construction of a new Long Bridge will have exponential economic impacts. Construction of the Long Bridge project – and the resulting increase in passenger trains – is expected to facilitate more than \$6 billion in additional economic activity in the Northern Virginia and Washington, DC, region each year.

The program's benefits can also be measured by increased access to jobs and improvement in quality of life. The new service plan for Amtrak and VRE includes late-night and weekend service for an important reason. We know that many jobs – especially in the service sectors – are not 9 to 5, Monday through Friday. That is why we worked with CSX, Amtrak, and VRE to add trains leaving Washington in the late evening as well as on the weekends. We needed to match train schedules to the reality of our economy. In addition, construction of the new Long Bridge will open up the possibility for “run through” service of commuter trains between Maryland and Virginia. While these services are not yet funded, these are the types of opportunities and partnerships created by this project.

Capital Grant Program Needed for Intercity Passenger Rail Infrastructure

While the Commonwealth funds 100 percent of the operating cost of state-supported trains, per the 2008 PRIIA guidelines, and applies for funding from various INFRA, BUILD, CRISI, and other USDOT programs to expand rail, there is no major, long-term, predictable funding program to assist states with the capital costs needed to expand state-supported passenger rail initiatives.

Through a commitment of state funds, regional funds, state priority transportation funds, more than \$200 million in VRE funding, and \$944 million in Amtrak funding, the Commonwealth was able to produce a \$3.7 billion financial plan. With additional funding, we could fully build out the Washington to Richmond corridor, upgrade the Buckingham Branch corridor, and develop the S-Line that will cut travel time from Raleigh to Richmond by 90 minutes and bring the Southeast closer to the Northeast.

As you continue to deliberate the crafting of a surface transportation bill, I again ask you to consider a capital grant program – such as the PRIME grant program – that would assist states in expanding passenger rail by funding at least 50 percent of the capital costs needed for these expansion projects. According to APTA, every \$1 billion invested in rail creates 24,000 highly skilled jobs and every \$1 invested generates \$4 in wider economic benefits.

Closing

I would be remiss if I did not thank Chairman DeFazio, Representative Norton, and Members of this Committee for including in last year's HR 2 a provision that authorized the National Park Service to convey land to Virginia and the District of Columbia for the purpose of constructing a rail bridge. Roughly four acres of NPS land adjacent to the current CSX track is needed for the new Long Bridge project, and bipartisan House support and passage of the provision in HR 2 went a long way in ensuring the provision was included in the year-end Omnibus Appropriations bill.

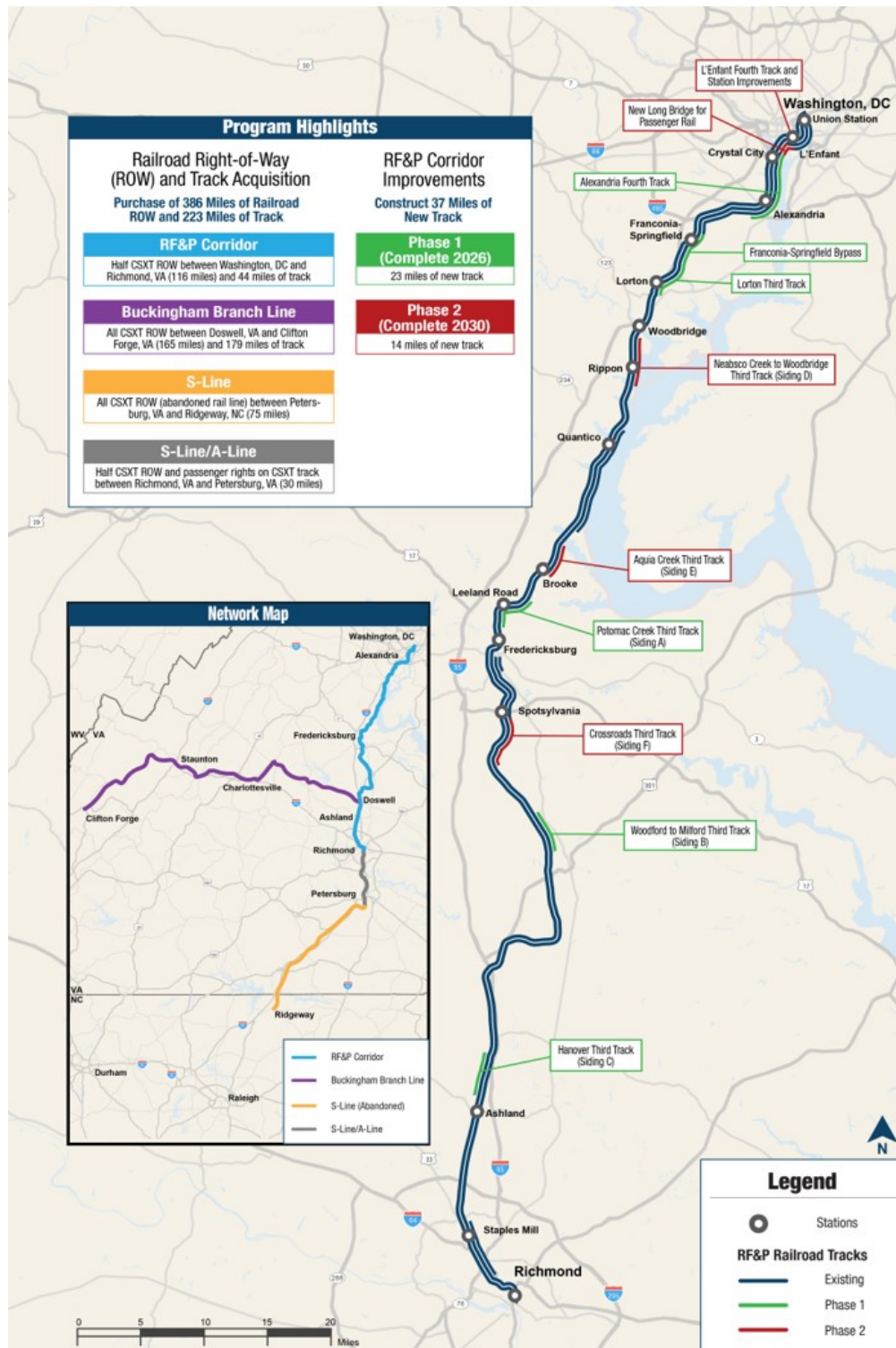
In closing, I want to share a statistic that I shared at the 10-year anniversary of the inauguration of that first state-supported route in Lynchburg, Virginia.

In 2009, rail reached 49 percent of Virginians and 53 percent of jobs.
Today, rail reaches 77 percent of Virginians and 88 percent of jobs.

In other words... not enough.

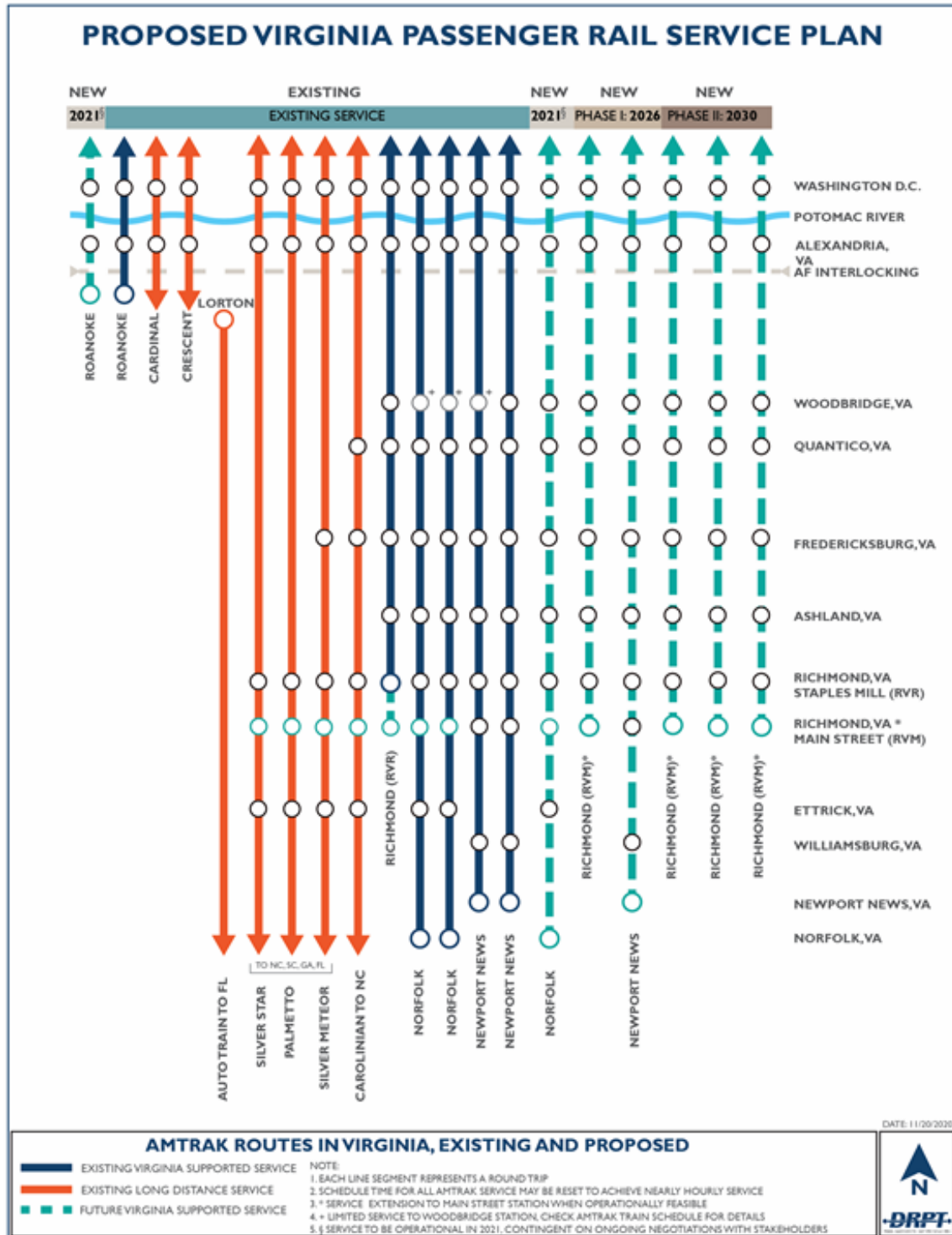
I thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today and sincerely look forward to working with you now and in the future. I would be pleased to answer your questions.

Transforming Rail in Virginia



After completion of Phases 1 and 2, Phases 3 and 4 would complete the dedicated 3rd track to Spotsylvania, which is the end of the VRE Service area.

Amtrak Service Plan



VRE Service Plan

