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Presentation from Meredith Richards

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Greater Northwest Passenger Rail Winter Gathering
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Thank you Charlie, It's a great pleasure to be here and take part in All Aboard Washington's Winter Gathering in Centralia.

Thank you to Charlie Hamilton, Patrick Carnahan and Luis Moscoso for your leadership in All Aboard Washington and for assisting Larry and me with hotel and ground transportation and to Aboard NW, to AORTA, Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority and other groups in the Northwestern States who excel at working across state lines for regional passenger rail advocacy. Thanks also to those in Northwestern states who serve on the Council of Representatives of the Rail Passengers Association and to Harvey Bowen, Dan Bilka and Mike Christensen for dedicated service on the Board of Directors.

I've worked with rail advocates in Virginia for more than 25 years and since being elected RPA Chair I've traveled across the country to meet with activists like you and your regional coalitions to find out what you're doing and how RPA can help you.

Everywhere I go, the work being done inspires me. I've learned that, no matter where you are, rail advocates like us are by nature optimists, like Mike Christensen from whom we just heard, who aspire to seemingly impossible goals and are willing to work a long time to achieve them.

We are working to change over a half century of misdirected transportation policies that all but destroyed passenger rail in America and are unsustainable in so many ways. We are changing the paradigm and disrupting the status quo.

Those misguided policies have left millions of people in large swaths of the country, including the Greater Northwest, parts of the Southwest, much of Rural America, and small cities and towns like Yakima, WA everywhere without access to reliable public transportation - abandoned first by their trains, then by the airlines then by their

interstate bus lines. Almost one-fifth of Amtrak's passengers travel to or from a rural station with no access to air service.

In addition, we've left some of America's larger cities --- Phoenix, Columbus, Las Vegas – totally unserved by intercity passenger rail and many more, such as Cleveland, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Charleston, San Antonio and on and on who remain underserved.

As recently as the mid-1950's my small city of Charlottesville had 22 daily passenger trains at all times of day to and from Washington, DC. By 1971 all that remained were the daily Crescent and three-day a week Cardinal.

And thank heaven for them! Thank heaven for our LD trains! They continue to be the lifeline of passenger rail in America.

When passenger advocates like us demand the right to access to safe, reliable, on-time rail transportation, a right many even today seek to deny, we are simply trying to recover what people once had and are entitled to have again.

The Virginia Story

I'm often asked how we managed to make the kind of progress in Virginia that FRA administrator Amit Bose, Amtrak President Steven Gardner, and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg have all referred to as a model for the country.

Looking back from the perspective of someone who has been on the frontlines, it's because for 30 years Virginia has played the long game.

It's fair to say that Virginia is richly served by Amtrak long-distance trains. Fully one-third of Amtrak routes run through Virginia on their way to and from the Northeast Corridor – trains connecting Virginia to Miami, Chicago, NOLA and our neighbors in NC, while Amtrak's auto train originates in Lorton, VA.

Along the way, these LD trains serve 17 of Virginia's 21 Stations. As the portal to Washington, DC and the NEC, Virginia enjoys a geographic advantage few states have, which was a solid foundation to build on when VA passenger rail advocates began to organize. We are fortunate in that regard.

But we've also had huge success developing state funded regional routes that connect all Virginia's major cities and many of its smaller towns and cities with twice or three times daily service to Washington and the northeast corridor.

Amtrak Virginia now operates eight daily state-funded round trip trains on three routes connecting Washington and the Northeast to Norfolk, Newport News, Richmond and Roanoke, including four stations not served by Amtrak LD trains.

All of these projects have occurred in the last 14 years, although the public framework and our policy successes as advocates has taken much longer.

Virginia regionals have fully recovered their pre-pandemic ridership. July 2023 was the highest ridership month EVER for VA regionals with just over 1 million passengers – in July..alone. Virginia regionals have served nearly 1.8 million passengers in 2023 and are easily on their way to exceed 2 million in 2024.

An analysis by the Virginia Rail Policy Institute, of which I am President, found that Virginia regionals ALONE reach 80% of Virginians within 20 miles of a station while 83% are within 20 miles of any Amtrak service, including the Virginia regionals. 83% of our jobs and 88% of Virginia colleges and universities are within 20 miles of a station.

We have more work to do in rural Southwest Virginia, where communities are devastated by the loss of jobs in key industries and have no access to passenger trains.

For those communities, Virginia is extending the Roanoke train to Christiansburg, the site of Virginia Tech, and beyond to the New River Valley. In addition an east-west route across the state is slated to be developed in the next decade to connect these communities to economic and population centers across Virginia.

As Virginia's passenger rail program was taking shape, what was occurring over a longer period of time was a progression of successful public rail policy initiatives that established the institutional, financial and legal framework for a robust 21st Century rail program.

Virginia rail advocates have assisted in establishing these public policies and getting them passed into law, even drafting model legislation and enlisting allies in the General Assembly to sponsor bills, which we followed with aggressive lobbying and action campaigns mobilizing the voices of thousands of citizens in support of them. We have been known to collaborate with state transportation officials on legislative initiatives to advance passenger rail.

I call this policy-focused advocacy and it is one of the distinguishing features of our advocacy in Virginia. This is fundamentally different from the more traditional model of Route-focused advocacy.

The idea of route- focus is to develop public and political support for establishing specific routes or extending routes or adding service frequencies, station stops or otherwise enhancing the performance of a specific route on a specific corridor - all important work being done by advocacy coalitions across the country.

The idea of Policy-focused advocacy, however, is to set up state and regional passenger rail for long term success by creating the capacity for more routes and more enhancements in the future. Once you have your new route or service, although it's a great thing, you're not won and done. Instead, you play the long game and prepare the way for more routes and better services in the future.

Our experience in Virginia is that we as citizen activists are often the force behind innovation and change. VRPI, in particular, researches and develops public policy initiatives in a way that state transportation officials are typically not tasked to do.

The Virginia Rail Policy Institute (VRPI), headquartered in Richmond, was founded in 2002 as an independent, non-profit resource for thought and analysis on rail public policy.

Our mission is to strengthen and improve public policy with respect to both freight and passenger rail in the Commonwealth, to increase public understanding of freight and passenger rail and promote public policies to secure the future of rail transportation in Virginia.

Our institute has often been the harbinger of change in the establishment of Virginia rail policy.

Virginia Policy Developments

The first step was taken over 30 years ago when Democratic Governor Doug Wilder established the Virginia department of rail and public transportation as a separate department within VDOT in 1992.

Two years later a group of Richmond Business leaders had a vision for high speed rail from the southeast to the northeast through Virginia.

They enlisted support from a handful of state senators from both sides of the aisle and in 2000 Republican Governor Jim Gilmore invested \$100 million in improving the Richmond to Washington corridor as a first step to HSR.

That group also created an advocacy non-profit, Virginians for High Speed Rail, under the leadership of former RF&P RR President and CEO, Dick Beadles. Dick was my

mentor at Virginians for High-Speed Rail and my predecessor as President of the Virginia Rail Policy Institute. He is also a long-time member of RPA.

After 27 years VHSR is a robust, statewide organization that ties together all the passenger rail advocacy groups and their projects across the state, at the same time working at the center to improve state rail policies for all regions and all projects.

One of VHSR's early legislative victories was leading the successful effort to create the VA-NC HSR compact and make it official in the State Code. This fostered a collaboration between VA and NC that continues to this day to jointly develop Higher SR from Raleigh to Washington and the NEC.

In 2002 a seminal event helped put Virginia on the road to rail bipartisanship in the legislature. I was on the Charlottesville City Council, and was serving as President of the Virginia Transit Association.

We secured a large foundation grant to bring a bipartisan group of 32 state and elected officials on a tour of rail facilities in the Pacific Northwest. Here they rode light rail, modern streetcars and intercity trains and learned about their many benefits.

Seeing is believing and many of these same people became allies for passenger rail and transit in the General Assembly.

At about the same time, Governor Mark Warner appointed a Commission to visualize a 21st Century rail program for Virginia and what it would take to achieve it.

I was a member of the commission and in 2005 we established Virginia's first dedicated, sustainable fund for rail capital improvements – The Rail Enhancement Fund, with revenue from the state's vehicle rental taxes.

It could not officially be used for passenger projects or federal matching funds and for several years the REF was used exclusively to support priority freight projects for Norfolk Southern and CSX.

VRPI published a comprehensive report on the fund's performance in which we recommended a more visionary plan for using the power of public rail infrastructure investments in the public interest.

This was timely, because it soon came time to secure the freight railroads' agreement to host the state's first passenger projects, and the Rail Enhancement Fund was leveraged to fund the "capacity improvements" the RRs required in exchange for hosting the state's passenger trains.

CvilleRail

At about the same time, I and a group of Charlottesville citizens were organizing an advocacy campaign to bring more and better trains to Virginia's US29 corridor from the NC border to the northern VA suburbs.

We created a coalition of stakeholders throughout the corridor and enlisted 22 political jurisdictions in a coordinated campaign to bring additional passenger rail to our communities, holding rail summits and coordinating our work, much like you are doing here.

We eventually won Governor Tim Kaine's support for Virginia's first state-supported intercity passenger train on the corridor - the Lynchburg NE regional - with only the first year paid for with reprogrammed funds and no guarantees after that.

Our little train was so successful that for a number of years it was the highest performing corridor train in the Amtrak system, with the exception of the Acela, in terms of cost recovery.

Due to a generous agreement with Amtrak, the ticket revenues from this train more than paid for its operation, freeing up state funds to invest in two more Northeast Regionals connecting Richmond and Norfolk to DC Union Station and the NEC.

With three state sponsored Amtrak trains to support and no source of operating funds, the next governor, Republican Bob McDonnell, realized the need for a sustainable resource to support Virginia's growing fleet of trains.

VHSR partnered with the administration in a successful campaign to establish the Intercity Passenger Rail Operating and Capital fund (IPROC), supported by a small increase in the state sales tax. At that time, the annual revenue from IPROC was about \$55 million, which kept our trains running and allowed the state to continue to develop its intercity network.

The next two Democratic administrations added frequencies to Norfolk and Newport News trains and extended the Lynchburg train to Roanoke.

A second frequency of the Roanoke train was launched in 2017 and the service will be extended to Christiansburg and the New River Valley by 2026.

In addition, a new route across Virginia was proposed in a well-researched report prepared by Virginians for High Speed Rail that will restore a historic East-West

service from southwest to southeast Virginia - from the Blue Ridge to the Beach across the Commonwealth.

Working with key legislators in the General Assembly, VHSR helped prepare a bill to study its feasibility and now The Commonwealth Corridor is a future project in the Statewide Rail Plan and has been accepted into the FRA's Corridor ID and Development program.

Transforming Rail Initiative

But it was in the administration of Democratic Governor Ralph Northam – just prior to the pandemic -- that Virginia took a giant step forward.

During the 2019 Virginia General Assembly Session, the Senate and House of Delegates approved similar resolutions requesting the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) to study a 52-miles stretch of the I-95 corridor that a 2017 study by the Texas Transportation Institute ranked as having the worst traffic congestion in the nation.

According to the study, widening even 50 miles of highway by one lane in each direction for 50 miles had an estimated cost of \$12.5B. While the cost was staggering, the most sobering aspect of the analysis was the prediction that by the time construction was completed in 10 years, the I-95 Corridor would be just as congested as it is today.

The better solution? Rail!! It was decided by the administration that the most cost-effective solution for both the short- and long term was to increase the throughput capacity within Virginia's rail corridors along I-95 and elsewhere. Rail, coupled with transit and road spot improvements was the recommended alternative, a solution for moving more people, rather than more cars through the corridor from North Carolina to Washington.

On December 19, 2019, I was present when VA Secretary of Transportation Shannon Valentine announced a 10-year, \$3.7 billion landmark deal with CSX that will transform intercity passenger, commuter and freight rail in Virginia.

The framework for these initiatives is a series of agreements with CSX and Buckingham Branch Railroad that mark significant departures in the way the state has historically done business with the freight RRs.

It also includes interjurisdictional agreements with the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Amtrak to jointly fund, construct, publicly own and operate a dedicated passenger rail bridge across the Potomac River.

In these agreements, the state has purchased over 350 miles of right of way and 225 miles of track to allow a billion dollar build out of infrastructure for third and sometimes fourth tracks dedicated to passenger rail only in the DC to Richmond corridor.

It also includes acquisition of 170 miles of CSX track operated by BBRR that will provide the key link in the restoration of east-west service between Charlottesville and Richmond to complete the Commonwealth Corridor route proposed by VHSR.

Most significantly, Virginia's Transforming Rail initiative includes construction of a \$1.9 billion Long bridge across the Potomac exclusively for passenger trains.

After over 100 years, passenger trains will no longer compete for slots on a two-track bridge which is at 98% capacity and carries all the freight, commuter, state-supported regionals and LD Amtrak trains crossing the Potomac.

This will free up incredible capacity for expansion of passenger rail for Amtrak, Virginia Railway Express and all routes that cross the Potomac.

Over the next 10 years these investments will double Amtrak state-supported service for nearly hourly trains between Richmond and Washington, enhance service for Newport News and Norfolk, and increase Northern Virginia commuter service by 75%. In short order, following these announcements, the General Assembly passed an Omnibus Transportation Bill that transforms the way Virginia finances its rail program, adds significant new funding for rail, and establishes a Passenger Rail Authority to oversee the expansion and operation of state-funded intercity passenger rail.

The FRA recently announced a \$100 million CRISI grant to Virginia for Transforming Rail in Virginia's (TRVA) Franconia-Springfield Bypass, another key chokepoint, and a \$1 billion dollar grant for the Raleigh to Richmond corridor S-line development.

Policy Innovations in the New Program

Virginia has adopted a host of policy innovations that signal a radical new approach to state rail development in the Transforming Rail in Virginia initiative. These align with specific revisions in rail policy advocated by VRPI over many years, including the following best practices in rail public policy:

- Comparative studies of the cost benefits of investing in more lanes versus more trains in traffic-choked corridors.
- Setting measurable, long-range goals for passenger rail in the corridor.

- Public money dedicated to State-initiated versus freight railroad initiated capital projects.
- Debt financing for high-cost projects (Long Bridge replacement).
- Public ownership and operation of strategic rail infrastructure for passenger projects.
- Acquisition of abandoned and underutilized freight rail lines for congestion-mitigating passenger projects. (Virginia Line, S-line, BBRR line)
- Public-private joint operating agreements on rail rights-of-way.
- Separating freight and passenger rail operations with lines dedicated to passenger right-of-way.
- A Passenger Rail Fund within the transportation trust fund, integrating rail within the biannual transportation budget. The Commonwealth Rail Fund now receives 7.5% of the entire state pool of transportation dollars, including fuel taxes, sales taxes, a variety of fees, and the two existing rail funds.
- A Passenger Rail Authority to own the public rail assets and oversee the construction and operation of Virginia's regional and high-speed passenger trains. .

VRPI's Impact on Rail Policy

Virginia rail advocates and our adjunct Rail Policy Institute have been a source of both challenges to the status quo and the presentation of positive alternatives for many years, and we believe our work has had an impact.

Virginia's plan to develop interconnecting regional routes that network with each other and with Amtrak long-distance routes and eventually with high speed rail corridors is indeed a model program. We as a state are transforming the way people travel in the Commonwealth.

Rail Passengers Association

While I continue my work in Virginia, I joined the board of the Rail Passengers Association because I believe strongly in RPA's work to improve federal laws, regulations and funding policies for passenger rail.

I'm especially proud of our President and CEO, Jim Mathews and Vice President of Policy and Government affairs, Sean Jean-Gail for their work and expertise on the development of a large portion of the Rail Section of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, including its funded programs, and regulations.

We brought the voice of passengers to the halls of Congress and secured \$66 billion of investment which has grown now to \$75 billion to modernize vast stretches of the existing U.S. passenger rail network, undoing decades of disinvestment.

FRA Amtrak Long-Distance Routes Study

Now Rail Passengers Association members and staff are working to ensure we get the most out of those investments. We have a large presence in the Federal Railroad Administration's Long Distance Service study. There are a total of 24 workshops being conducted and we will be in the room and at the table at each of them.

We have reached a historic moment in passenger rail in America, with unprecedented opportunities for growth in rural and urban America alike.

Rail CAN play a central role in America's transportation and economic future. We cannot let this opportunity pass us by. The time is now.