

## **10. RAIL ABANDONMENTS, CONSOLIDATIONS, SAFETY AND TRAILS**

### **10.1. FRA Requirements**

This Chapter of the Virginia Statewide Rail Plan (VSRP) presents information related to specific aspects of Virginia's rail system.

The requirements of 49 CFR § 266.15 (c)(3)(ii), and 49 CFR § 266.15 (c)(3)(iv) are fulfilled by section 10.2

The requirements of 49 CFR § 266.15 (c)(3)(v) are fulfilled by section 10.3.

### **10.2. Rail Abandonments**

Rail line abandonment description and maps are discussed in detail in Appendix A. Railway mileage peaked in Virginia at approximately 4,700 route miles in 1920. Today, there are approximately 3,200 route miles, a loss of roughly 32 percent. Railway mileage continues to decline, although the pace has slowed significantly as much of the unprofitable segments and unneeded capacity have already been abandoned. In the 20 year period between 1970 and 1990, there were 679.81 route miles abandoned in Virginia. In the 16 year period from 1991 to 2007, there were only 132.92 route miles abandoned.

There are no rail lines in the state which a common carrier has identified as potentially subject to abandonment in the next three years.

There are no rail lines in the state for which abandonment or discontinuance applications are pending.

### **10.3. Rail Consolidations**

In 2009, the Buckingham Branch Railroad Shortline has acquired the Virginia Southern Shortline Railroad and is operating this railroad as the Virginia Southern Division of the BBRR. To the extent that public information is available, the Commonwealth has no knowledge of other common carrier lines operating within Virginia that have submitted proposals, or are in the process of negotiations for any mergers, consolidations, reorganizations, purchases by other common carriers, or other unification and coordination projects

## 10.4. Rail Safety

Rail safety is a critical issue for rail operators and public agencies that have an oversight role for transportation safety. Highway-rail grade crossing safety is of particular concern. According to the Association of American Railroads (AAR), from 1980 through 2007, the number of grade crossing incidents fell 74 percent, while the grade crossing incident rate (incidents per million train-miles) fell 77 percent. Based on accident data 2007 was the safest year ever in terms of grade crossing safety.

AAR estimates that there are approximately 145,000 public grade crossings in the United States, and that improving grade crossing safety represents an enormous challenge that will take the combined efforts of railroads; state, local, and federal governments; public safety officials; and the public. A freight train moving at 55 miles an hour can take a mile or more to stop. According to a June 2004 report issued by the Department of Transportation's Inspector General, 94 percent of all grade crossing accidents are caused by risky driver behavior, and about half of all grade crossing accidents occur at crossings that are already equipped with active warning devices such as bells, gates, and lights.

### 10.4.1. Operation Lifesaver

Operation Lifesaver is a non-profit, international continuing public education program first established in 1972 to end collisions, deaths and injuries at places where roadways cross train tracks, and on railroad rights-of-way.

Operation Lifesaver programs are sponsored cooperatively by federal, state, and local government agencies; highway safety organizations, and the nation's railroads. DRPT is an active participant in Virginia Operation Lifesaver Inc., a non-profit organization established in 1979 to address the need in Virginia to eliminate death and injuries at highway-rail grade crossings and on railroad rights of way and properties.

Virginia Operation Lifesaver is made up of volunteer Presenters that give free presentations regarding highway-rail grade crossing safety and trespass prevention on railroad rights of way and properties to: schools, drivers training classes, professional drivers, school bus drivers, public safety personnel, civic groups, and any other organization that has an interest. According to Operation Lifesaver statistics for 2008:

- National: At the national level there were 2,391 collisions; 935 injuries; and 286 fatalities associated with highway-rail grade crossings. There were 426 injuries and 458 fatalities associated with trespassers on railroad rights-of-way.
- Virginia: Within the Commonwealth, there were 44 collisions, 14 injuries and 4 fatalities associated with highway-rail grade crossings. There were 8 injuries and 4 fatalities associated with trespassers on railroad rights-of-way.

#### 10.4.2. Highway – Rail Grade Crossings

The Commonwealth through VDOT has received approximately \$6.7 million in federal funds under Section 1103(f) since 1993 for its portion of the designated Southeast High-Speed Corridor. These funds have been used to install lights, gates, and constant warning time devices at 36 crossings, construct a pedestrian overpass over the high-speed corridor in Prince William County, and support design and construction of three grade separations completed with Section 148 funds.

Under the FHWA Section 148 Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP) the Commonwealth receives \$4.4 million per year for highway-rail grade crossing safety projects. These Section 148 funds are not restricted to passenger rail lines, but can be used for freight rail crossings as well. By designating additional federal safety funds for railroads, VDOT has been able to complete between 15 and 40 projects per year. Also, support is provided for grade separations that will be paid for by other funds. Closures of existing at-grade crossings are made where possible under this funding program.

As the number and frequency of trains continue to increase in Virginia, concern has been raised by municipalities and communities where past land use decisions have allowed residential neighborhoods to be built near mainline rail tracks and where crossing of rail tracks by automobiles is an accepted practice to access main highways. A recent study by the Hampton Roads Planning District identified a number of at-grade crossings in the Suffolk area where communities have been adversely impacted by the increase in the number of trains carrying coal and intermodal cargo. Where significant impacts occur, VDOT serves as the Commonwealth's agency with the responsibility to evaluate the need for crossing improvements, or the elimination of the crossing by constructing a grade separating bridge to carry the highway over the existing rail tracks.

A recent rail safety project example is the Commonwealth Railway Mainline Safety Relocation project currently under construction, and scheduled for completion by the end of 2009. The project consists of relocating approximately 4.5 miles of existing shortline rail tracks (Commonwealth Railway) to the medians of the Western Freeway (Route 164) and I-664) through Portsmouth, Chesapeake and Suffolk, Virginia. In the early 1980s, both roadways were built to accommodate a dual set of rail tracks within their medians. This rail-ready corridor will be used to serve both the planned Craney Island Marine Terminal and the recently completed APM Marine Terminal. Rail traffic from these two facilities is expected to exceed one million TEUs annually. As depicted in Figure 10-1, relocation of the existing rail line to the Route 164/I-664 Median Rail-Ready Corridor will:

- Move the rail line away from densely populated areas of Chesapeake and Portsmouth, Virginia, to a secure, guard-rail protected rail corridor away from pedestrian and motorist traffic
- Eliminate the potential for rail-related accidents at the 14 at-grade crossings currently used by motorists and pedestrians
- Limit the noise levels and pollution emissions from automobiles idling at railroad crossings as well as from trains passing through the neighborhoods in the vicinity of the existing lines

- Divert containerized cargo traffic away from regional highways, thereby reducing highway congestion and improving highway safety

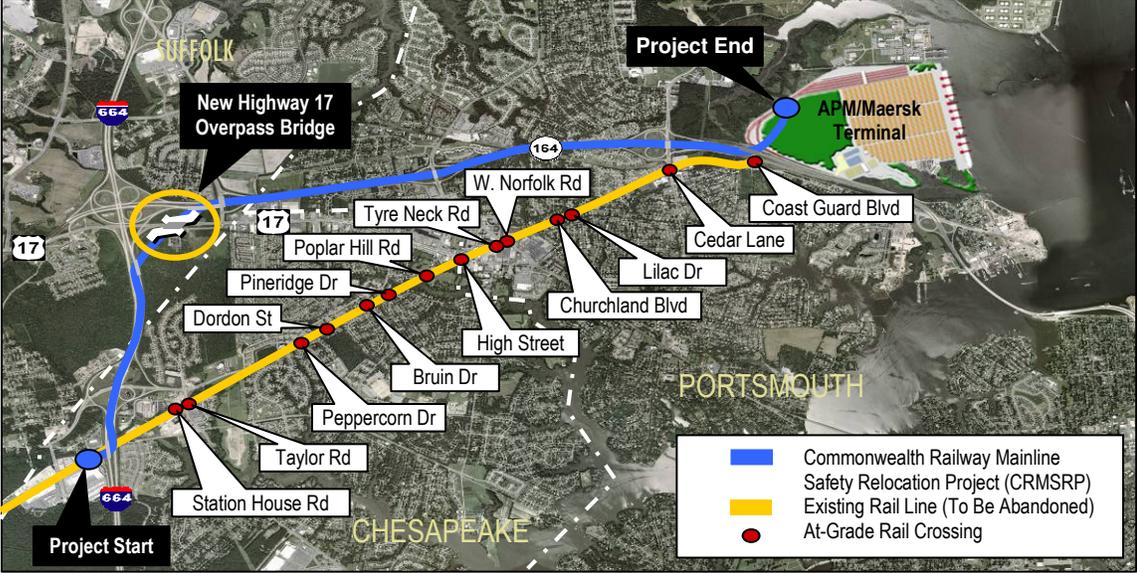


Figure 10 - 1 Commonwealth Railway Mainline Safety Relocation Project (Plan View)

10.5. Rails to Trails

Trails that are built alongside abandoned rail corridors are known as "rails-to-trails." Trails that are built adjacent to an active rail line are known as "rails-with-trails." Existing rails to trails in Virginia are discussed and depicted on maps in Appendix A and are based on the Virginia Outdoors Plan (2007) prepared by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). Also shown and discussed are potential trail projects that are under development, or are being evaluated for feasibility by the Commonwealth.