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62 miles of rail-with-trail on high-speed corridor plan

David Newton, writer

Plans for high speed rail passenger service on the CSX railroad S-line from Virginia to Raleigh include roughly 62 parallel miles of rail-with-trail across the rural northern Piedmont, says a state transportation official.

Trail design and environmental fieldwork will be completed by 2010. Then local governments can explore local, state and federal funding sources as Virginia local governments do the same thing.

Their aim: Environmental clearance for a 116-mile, two-state trail from Raleigh to Petersburg, Va., as part of East Coast Greenway. The Virginia part of the project parallels the Norlina to Petersburg line that CSX ripped up in the early 1980s.

"Quite encouraging," is how David Foster, the Southeast High Speed Rail Corridor's project manager for the state Department of Transportation, termed the cooperation between the two states and their transportation agencies. At Virginia's suggestion, the two state transportation agencies piggybacked the trail design and environmental work with the same work being done for the improved rail system.

The federal DOT's Southeast High Speed Rail plan, or SEHSR, links Washington, Raleigh and Charlotte. Plans call for eventual links into South Carolina, Georgia and beyond. The trains will hit highs of 110 mph and will average about 85 mph.

Foster gave these specifics on the rail-with-trail. A 30-foot wide trail footprint will sit in a 60-foot wide trail right of way as the trail flips to the east and west of the CSX track. The trail will average 100 feet from the track and will typically run no closer than 60 feet. About one-third of the trail will be 1,000 feet or more from the track.

Nationally the number of rail-with-trails has jumped from 37 totaling 152 miles in 1996 to 60 totaling 240 miles in 2000 with 4.5 million annual users, according to a Federal Highway Administration study. North Carolina has one mile of rail-with-trail, the Libba Cotton Bikeway in Carrboro.

SEHSR will tie into the speedy Northeast Washington-to-Boston corridor. A recent report to Congress identified \$357.2 billion in rail needs by 2050. The plan focuses on high speed passenger rail service in five rapidly growing corridors across the nation and is subject to Congressional approval.

The return to rails is reflected in the private sector. Freight railroads plan on \$12 billion in upgrades over the next few years to make freight trains run faster and bigger. The investment occurs in the context of \$3 a gallon gasoline and the high price tag for building and rebuilding roads.

That rail-with-trail is part of the high-speed rail corridor discussion is of some consolation to two Triangle trail boosters. Board member Dave Connelly reports that four years ago he and Bill Bussey of Triangle Rails-to-Trails Conservancy suggested that rail-with-trail be folded into discussions but got little traction.