

June 7, 2007

TO: Chairman Gibbons and Commissioners

FROM: Alfred H. Harf
Executive Director

RE: National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) Study on Possible
Freight Railroad Bypasses of Downtown Washington

Introduction

At the May Commission meeting, Chairman Gibbons asked PRTC management to produce an information report on the subject study, which the NCPC recently completed. This is that information report.

Concerns about the movement of hazardous rail freight cargo (“hazmats”) through Washington D.C. have been long-standing, because the rail line used for this purpose is so close to the nation’s Capitol, multiple federal offices, and the homes of sizable numbers of District residents. Indeed, the District’s City Council was concerned enough to try to legislate a ban on the use of this line for hazardous cargo transport, which was contested by the CSXT and the federal government and is now awaiting court action. While both the CSXT and the federal government insist that any such ban is a violation of interstate commerce protections that freight railroads enjoy, the concern is nonetheless acknowledged and the CSXT has, by its own telling, voluntarily rerouted the most dangerous of its cargo traffic elsewhere.

The same concerns prompted the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to award a million dollar grant to the NCPC to examine possible rail freight reroutings, which the NCPC and the District Government jointly completed with outside consultant support in March. The Report’s findings were presented to the Washington Metropolitan Area Council of Governments (COG) in April, prompting a flurry of newspaper stories on the subject.

What was studied?

As detailed in the Executive Summary of the Report (attachment one), three rerouting alternatives were selected from a screening of many more possibilities for cost-benefit analysis, and all were found to have cost-benefit ratios larger than 1.0, the minimum ratio for concluding that a project may be worth pursuing:

Chairman Gibbons and Commissioners

June 7, 2007

Page 2

1. A new nine-mile tunnel through DC;
2. A rail freight bypass involving a new crossing of the Potomac River at the northern end of Stafford County labeled the “Indian Head routing” (because it would use the existing Indian Head branch line after crossing from Virginia to Maryland); and
3. A rail freight bypass involving a new crossing of the Potomac River in King George County labeled the “Dahlgren routing” (because it would connect the RF&P Branch with the Pope’s Creek Branch via the abandoned Dahlgren Railroad right-of-way).

The Report authors do not declare a preference among these alternatives, though the Report notes that the “Indian Head routing” alternative has the highest cost-benefit ratio. Instead, the authors call for further/more detailed study, suggesting that this be in the form of an environmental impact statement (EIS), with uniquely defined funding and organizational arrangements to account for the far-reaching geographic impacts of the rerouting alternatives and their likely costs and benefits. The authors also suggest that the funding be “a mix of federal grants, innovative financing tools, and public-private partnership mechanisms similar to those used in other large railroad projects, such as the Alameda Corridor project in Southern California and the CREATE project in the Chicago area”. Finally, acknowledging the “real estate value capture” potential of such an undertaking, the authors also recommend that the ability to leverage such benefits as a possible means of funding the project in part be thoroughly evaluated in the ensuing work.

While I won’t regurgitate the analysis findings here, one point that warrants highlighting is that all the alternatives require investments amounting to billions of dollars (i.e., \$4.3-5.3 billion). Mindful of this and recognizing that a project of this magnitude would be years in the making at best, the Report also details some shorter-term improvements that would ease congestion on the existing routing and improve security, while hastening to add that such improvements “would not solve the major capacity and security problems”. With the shorter term improvements alone, “freight railroad capacity would still be constrained by the Virginia Avenue tunnel, passenger and freight rail service would continue to share the same alignment, and the freight railroad could continue to carry hazmats alongside federal office buildings and the U.S. Capitol”.

Reactions to the Report

The April COG presentation prompted swift reaction from Maryland officials, who objected to the alternatives that would reroute hazmat cargo movement through eastern Maryland. An editorial in the May 4th edition of the Washington Post (attachment two) expresses doubts about the likelihood of federal funding for a project of this magnitude, suggesting instead that the legitimate concerns prompting this study be addressed instead by pursuit of less expensive remedies, “such as asking for more rail inspectors or advanced rail car screening, initiatives that would benefit other areas of the country as well and get a more sympathetic reception in Congress”.

On Tuesday, May 1st, NCPC Deputy Executive Director Marcel Acosta presented the findings of the study to the King George Board of Supervisors. As the article recounting this presentation notes (attachment three), the King George Board faulted the NVPC for failing to consult with local officials during the course of the study, and highlighted the vulnerabilities associated with the presence of the Dahlgren Navy Base in the County. If the King George officials have a preference for one of the alternatives examined, it is not apparent from the newspaper account.

Other related materials

The NCPC press release issued on April 5th to announce the release of the study appears here as attachment four.

Attachments: As stated