

Amtrak debuts new Va. line, the "Northeast Regional"

Written by Donnie Johnston - The Free Lance-Star
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FREDERICKSBURG, Va. — The Northeast Regional, the first state-supported passenger train in Virginia's history, got off to a rousing start yesterday.

Loaded with local and state dignitaries and members of the media, the Amtrak train was met by enthusiastic crowds and brass bands at almost every stop between Washington and Lynchburg.

Mayors, state lawmakers, railroad officials and Gov. Tim Kaine made hearty speeches hailing the new service, which will connect Lynchburg with Boston via Washington, as a boon to commerce and tourism.

Even former Gov. Linwood Holton, who is Kaine's father-in-law and a former Amtrak board member, stepped up to the podium in Charlottesville and Lynchburg and declared that America and Virginia needed more passenger train service to help alleviate crowded skies and highways.

The inaugural run of the Northeast Regional was highly successful--but all of yesterday's hoopla will be in vain if people along the U.S. 29 Corridor don't support the service.

The new service, which has been sought by Lynchburg and Charlottesville for almost two decades, will operate on a trial basis for three years. If enough people ride the train, it will continue. If not, the service will go away.

Seven-days-week round-trip service officially begins today with trains leaving Lynchburg each morning and returning each evening. There will be stops in Charlottesville, Culpeper, Manassas and Alexandria. Connections can be made in Washington for New York and Boston.

In Culpeper yesterday, more than 100 people showed up in the biggest railroad gathering since Democratic vice-presidential candidate Lyndon Johnson made a whistle stop there in October of 1960.

The train was 20 minutes late, leaving Mayor Pranas Rimeikis to entertain the crowd with stale train jokes until the Northeast Regional arrived. By that time, the Eastern View High School band, which had already spent its repertoire, had been forced to leave so the students could return to class.

Despite the lack of background music, the train arrived to a rousing cheer from the crowd. Del. Ed Scott, R-Culpeper, said the Northeast Regional had become a reality as a result of "delegates working across the aisle."

Amtrak President Joe Boardman called passenger rail service "a forgotten piece of the transportation balance" in America, and Virginia Transportation Secretary Pierce Homer said the new route "would bring [Virginians] closer together."

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While Kaine was the featured speaker during festivities in Charlottesville, it was his father-in-law who stole the show.

Holton entertained a crowd of about 200 for 10 minutes with stories of riding passenger trains from Bristol (he said he hitch-hiked there from his native Big Stone Gap) to college at Washington & Lee University during his youth.

But while the octogenarian's speech was spiced with humor, it was tempered with political savvy and hard facts.

"Subsidy has to be part of our overall transportation system," Holton said of the state-supported passenger rail service. "We have a great exhibit here of what is happening in our transportation system."

In Lynchburg, where about 500 people and a third brass band gathered, Kaine called the Northeast Regional "a building block" to the long proposed Trans-Dominion Express that would link Bristol, Richmond and Washington.

And Del. Shannon Valentine, D-Lynchburg, reminded the audience that the cost of operating the Northeast Regional for three years was less than the funds needed to build one mile of highway.

Culpeper Town Councilman Chris Snider rode the inaugural train from Manassas to Culpeper while Councilman Bobby Ryan, Supervisors Steve Nixon and Steve Walker, and Culpeper Chamber of Commerce Director Jim Charapich rode from Culpeper to Lynchburg.

When asked what he thought of the Northeast Regional service, Nixon replied, "I think we're on the right track."