

POTOMAC RAIL NEWS

POTOMAC CHAPTER, NATIONAL RAILWAY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
P.O. BOX 235, KENSINGTON, MARYLAND 20895-0235

FEBRUARY 2024



PASSENGER SERVICE TO RETURN TO GETTYSBURG. Patriot Rail has announced plans to resume regularly scheduled passenger service on the former Reading Company (ex-Philadelphia and Reading) branch between Gettysburg and Mount Holly Springs, PA. In May 2002, EMD F7s; No. 401 and No. 402 are leading a five-car Gettysburg Scenic Railway train near Gardners, Pennsylvania. Photo by: Alex Mayes; more details on page 2.

PROGRAM. Bob Kaplan will present a Zoom program titled "Railroading in the Columbia River Gorge." Bob's earliest photos were taken in 1973 in Portland, Oregon, and Vancouver, Washington. Coverage in the Gorge begins in 1978 and extends through 2012. Photos taken of freights in the Deschutes River Canyon and of a couple of steam excursions will be included.

MEETING VIA ZOOM: February 20, 2024 at 8PM. ZOOM LOGIN LINK ON PAGE 2.

NEXT MEETING DATE: March 19, 2024

DEADLINE FOR MARCH ISSUE: February 29, 2024. Send news items to Clay Moritz, Editor, Potomac Rail News, at c.moritz@comcast.net

INFO ON CHAPTER ACTIVITIES: <http://potomacnrhs.org/>

ADDRESS MEMBERSHIP INQUIRIES TO: Rick Davidson, Membership Agent, 2908 Breezy Terrace, Alexandria, VA 22303-2401 rdavidsonjr2908@gmail.com

THE CHAPTER FAMILY

If you know of a Chapter Member who is sick, has lost a loved one, or has a new birth in the family, please contact the editor at: c.moritz@comcast.net

ZOOM TOPIC: POTOMAC CHAPTER FEBRUARY MEMBERSHIP MEETING:

Time: Feb. 20, 2024 08:00 PM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81672625788?pwd=MHptaXJpL1RUalhEcDFwZk5vaGREdz09>

Meeting ID: 816 7262 5788

Passcode: 547873

One tap mobile

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THIS MONTH'S COVER PHOTO: Passenger service on the Gettysburg and Northern Railroad is scheduled to resume in 2025 after an 18-year absence. Patriot Rail, which acquired the 25-mile shortline in 2022, has announced plans to resume regularly scheduled passenger service on the former Reading Company (ex-Philadelphia and Reading) branch between Gettysburg and Mount Holly Springs, PA. The trains will be powered by older EMD freight engines in dark blue schemes. Patriot Rail has acquired eight vintage sleepers built by the Budd Company in the 1950s that are undergoing modifications for passenger seating and other accommodations.

The Gettysburg Scenic Railway, a component of the Gettysburg Railroad as it was previously known, ran steam and diesel-powered passenger trains and charters on this line until 2007. This photo was taken near Gardners, PA, on a May 2002 charter operated by the Chesapeake Railway Association. Powering the five-car train are a pair EMD F7s: No. 401 was previously Bessemer and Lake Erie No. 726A, No. 402 was Chicago Northwestern No. 4086A. - Alex Mayes

IN MEMORIAM. With Deep Sadness we note the passing of long-time Potomac Chapter Member Phil Bush. The following notice appeared in the Philadelphia Chapter's January Cinders. Phillip Brooks Bush II. January 13, 2024. Captain Philip Brooks Bush II (Retired), 93, of Washington, DC, dies on Saturday, January 13, 2024, at Brighton Gardens of Friendship Heights in Chevy Chase, MD. Known as Phil in his Washington circles, and as Brooks among friends and family in his hometown of Lenoir, NC.

He was a graduate of Central High School (Lenoir), Lenoir-Rhyne College (Hickory, NC) and Georgetown University (Master's Degree). In high school he was proud to have been in the Young Republicans Club with future U.S. Senator James T. Broyhill. Phil served honorably in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a Captain in the U.S. Naval Reserve. In civilian life, he served as Chief Budget Officer for the Navy at the Pentagon, retiring at 55 in 1986, but not before his final budget was complete.

Retiring was when the fun really took off. No one loved trains and railroads more than Phil. His lifelong hobby took him all over the continent collecting thousands of miles on Amtrak rail lines and enjoying hundreds of excursions on steam trains, diesel engines, and electric-powered locomotives. In the process, he made many friends and associates on adventures all over the United States. It was a glorious sight to see them all racing around to get the best possible picture angles when the special trains would stop to let everyone

off, backtrack and then race by for close-ups. He took his brother and nephew with him in 1994 for the 125th Anniversary of the driving of the Golden Spike at Promontory Point in Utah. His very last train adventure included a trip on a Sugar Cane plantation rail line in Florida as well as a ride on AutoTrain.

The Potomac Chapter extends our Deepest Sympathy to Phil's family and friends. Our Thoughts and Prayers are with you.

Phillip Brooks Bush II will be interred at Arlington National Cemetery. This resting place was particularly important to him. Donations in Phil's memory may be made to the Caldwell Heritage Museum (Lenoir) or the N.C. Transportation Museum (Spencer), anything that keeps the history of trains alive.

A Memorial Service will be held at Mount Olivet Lutheran Church, Arlington, Virginia at 2:30 p.m. on Saturday, February 24. The family wishes to thank the staff of Murphy Funeral Homes of Arlington. (The Washington Post, January 26, 2024)

IN MEMORIAM. With Deep Sadness, we note the passing of long-time Potomac Chapter Member Alan Maples' Mother, Mary Lee, who passed away on January 17, 2024, at the age of 96, following a brief illness. She was a resident of the Ingleside at Rock Creek retirement community in Washington, DC.

A native Washingtonian, Mary Lee attended local schools in Chevy Chase, Maryland, except for three years while the family lived in London, England. Mary Lee graduated from the College of Wooster, Wooster, OH, in 1949, and worked briefly for the DC Public Library System, before attending the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, PA, where she graduated in 1951 with a master's degree in library sciences.

From 1951 to 1961 Mary Lee worked as a children's librarian, first in Baltimore, MD, and then with the DC Public Library system, where she met Houston L. Maples, Jr. They were married in 1959 and Mary Lee set aside library work in 1961 to raise two sons. In 1976 she returned to her library career, working for the Norwood School, a private elementary school, until 1991.

Mary Lee was a lifelong member of the Chevy Chase Presbyterian Church and volunteered often in the church library. In her free time she participated in a children's storytelling group and enjoyed crocheting and needlepoint crafts.

The Potomac Chapter extends its Deepest Sympathy to Alan and his family. You are in our Thoughts and Prayers.

RAIL NEWS

WINCHESTER & WESTERN'S HISTORIC SANDMAN BRANCH TO KEEP CHUGGING ALONG, DESPITE IDLING OF SAND MINE. The Winchester & Western Railroad will continue to operate an 18-mile stretch of track that runs from Winchester to Gore, VA, in western Frederick County, even though the decades-old sand mine in Gore that it serves is idling. That's according to an official from OmniTRAX, which owns the short-line railroad.

The Virginia Division of Winchester & Western Railroad has two lines – the Winchester Mainline, which runs to Hagerstown, Maryland, and the Sandman Branch between Gore and Winchester. The Winchester & Western has played a role in the local economy for more than 100 years, with a history of carloads of lumber being hauled as far back as 1918.

In November, the sand mine's owner, Covia, confirmed the Gore mine would be idled indefinitely on February 29th after 80 years of activity. That raised the question about what would happen to the Sandman Branch. Turns out, not very much, according to an email from Brian Ward, OmniTRAX's Senior Vice President of Marketing Development and Transload. "We are not planning to close this line. Our locomotive shop is in Gore and will continue to maintain the locomotives that

help service all the customers in Winchester and up through all of the WW rail line," he wrote in an email to The Winchester Star. Ward added that OmniTRAX will continue to work with economic development groups and business prospects that have an interest in locating along the corridor between Gore and Winchester.

Apart from the sand mine, OmniTRAX doesn't currently do business with any companies along the Sandman Branch. Gore is the western terminus of Winchester & Western.

"In addition to our locomotive shop, we will continue to work with prospects and economic development groups to locate companies along the WW, including along the Sandman," Ward said. "At OmniTRAX, our goal is to help communities grow and rail is an important transportation link that can influence where companies locate."

The Virginia Division of Winchester & Western Railroad has 53 miles of track running through the Shenandoah Valley and moves approximately 12,500 carloads per year, according to OmniTRAX's website. OmniTRAX – one of the largest privately held rail-centric transportation and transportation infrastructure holding companies in North America – bought Winchester & Western Railroad from Ohio-based Covia Holdings Corporation in September 2019 for \$105 million.

Ward went on to write that, while Covia and the sand mine have been a great customer for Winchester & Western, there has been substantial investment by a number of major manufacturers since OmniTRAX's 2019 purchase of the railroad, including Procter & Gamble and Clorox in neighboring West Virginia. That growth along the Interstate 81 corridor has outpaced the impact of the mine closure, he noted.

Departing from Winchester, the Sandman Branch heads west following Abrams Creek, then moves northwest to Round Hill, up to Gainesboro, then loops down to Gore, according to a map on the OmniTRAX website.

In 2010, The Winchester Star reported that the Winchester & Western hauled more than 100 tons of sand in multiple cars from Gore to Winchester three to five times a week. It began doing business with the sand mine in Gore in the 1970s, according to the article. The sand mine, located at 334 Sand Mine Road, has had several owners but was acquired in the 1970s by Unimin, which merged with Fairmont-Santrol in 2018 to form Covia.

The mine will be idled indefinitely at the end of the month, according to a previous email from Amanda Meehan, Covia's Director of Corporate Communications. "As with all mines, operating costs for Gore have gone up as the mine has aged," Meehan said in November. "After completing an economic evaluation of Gore's on-going vitality and viability, we have made the decision to indefinitely idle Gore as we do not see a path for it to meet our economic thresholds for our operations network."

Thirty people worked at the mine, according to Meehan.

Sand mining is the extraction of sand, usually through an open pit mine or a sand pit. The sand is often used to make concrete, cement or glass. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, sand is the planet's most mined material, with some 50 billion tons extracted from lakes, riverbeds, coastlines and deltas each year, Reuters reported in 2021. (The Winchester Star)

FIVE RED LINE METRORAIL STATIONS WILL CLOSE THIS SUMMER TO LINK METRO WITH PURPLE LINE. On February 8th, Metro announced that Red Line service between Fort Totten and Glenmont will be shut down this summer so workers can build connections with Maryland's Purple Line light-rail project.

The Silver Spring, Forest Glen, Wheaton, and Glenmont stations will be closed all summer, from early June through early September. The Takoma station will be closed for a portion of the summer that Metro has yet to determine, Metro spokeswoman Sherri Ly clarified on Thursday. One Metro planner said it could be

in the 30-to-45-day range. The closures will allow Maryland Transit Authority contractors to construct a mezzanine at Silver Spring.

The work will eventually allow passengers to reach trains running on the Purple Line, the 16-mile light-rail line projected to open to passengers in 2027.

Bus shuttles will run from Fort Totten to Glenmont during the closures, according to Metro, but details are still being planned. The project involves the tracks in both directions for an extended period, so other options such as a partial shutdown were not possible, Metro said.

Metro will conduct other work along the closed stretch at the same time, including fixing the track at Takoma, Metro said. Leaks will be addressed, power cables installed, and train-control equipment and tunnel piping replaced, in addition to elevator and escalator maintenance.

Metro was also set Thursday to outline other major planned closures over the next two-plus years. They include restricting service from December to January 2025 from the Foggy Bottom-GWU station to the L'Enfant Plaza station on the Blue, Orange, and Silver lines to address needed maintenance. Metro officials said they are not planning a complete closure along that stretch and are considering a range of options – with varying levels of cost and inconvenience – including weekend single-tracking, early closures, and working overnight.

In summer 2025, at dates still to be determined, Metro plans to shut down Blue Line service from Franconia-Springfield to King Street for about three weeks. Then Metro workers will shut the Green Line from Congress Heights to the Branch Avenue Yard. Both closures are for needed upgrades, Metro said.

In winter 2025-2026, additional closures and disruptions will come to the Yellow and Green lines between L'Enfant Plaza and Fort Totten, Metro said. And in summer 2026, the Red Line will shut down again, this time on the other side of the line, affecting the stretch from Friendship Heights to Grosvenor-Strathmore. That will allow workers to connect the Purple Line with the mezzanine at the Bethesda station, Metro said. (Washington Post)

WESTERN MARYLAND SCENIC BEGINS FUNDRAISING TO RETURN STEAM LOCOMOTIVES 1309 AND 734 TO OPERATION. Western Maryland Scenic Railroad has launched a fund-raising campaign to return both its steam locomotives – 2-6-6-2 No. 1309 and 2-8-0 No. 734 – to operation, with No. 1309 newly sidelined after the discovery it needs its pistons and rods replaced.

The former Chesapeake & Ohio 2-6-6-2 has been the railroad's steam power for the last two years after a multi-year, \$1 million-plus rebuild at WMSR's Ridgeley, WV, shops. The pistons were not part of that rebuild, but the railroad says it discovered that replacement was needed during operation in December. "Although this was already in the works, the timeframe has become sooner than expected," the railroad says on the donation page on its website.

Compound Mallet No. 1309 was one of 10 identical Class H-6 locomotives ordered by the C&O in 1948 and delivered by Baldwin in 1949. They were the last Mallets produced by that builder. Though this was very late in the steam era, C&O was looking for quick, relatively inexpensive replacements for their aging articulated locomotives serving the southern West Virginia coalfields out of the Peach Creek Yard in the Logan district. After less than 10 years of service, C&O retired No. 1309 in 1957 and donated the locomotive to the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Museum. Western Maryland Scenic purchased the locomotive in 2014.

No. 734 had previously been sidelined for its 1,472-day inspection and complete rebuild. The locomotive began life as Lake Superior & Ishpeming Railroad No. 34, one of three Class SC-1 Consolidations delivered by Baldwin in 1916. LS&I retired its steam locomotives in 1963, and sold all three SC-1s to Marquette & Huron Mountain Railroad, which operated them in tourist service until 1987. It was then sold to the Illinois Railroad Museum, which sold the locomotive to

Western Maryland Scenic in 1991. Where it was restored to resemble a Western Maryland Class H Consolidation. It emerged from its rebuild in 1993 with the No. 734, matching an older-design Western Maryland Railway Class H-7 locomotive, while the huge 12-wheel tender (from a New York Central Railroad "Mohawk" 4-8-2, purchased from CSX after serving in work-train service) and piston-valve cylinders more closely resembled the Western Maryland Class H-9 consolidations. Many consider the H-9 locomotives the very apex of 2-8-0 development. More information on the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad is available at www.wmsr.com. (Trains News Wire)

WMSR TO RECEIVE \$200K FOR TRACK MAINTENANCE. The Western Maryland Scenic Railroad has been awarded a state grant for \$200,000 for track maintenance, according to CEO Wes Heinz.

Although the WMSR is in the process of reviving 13.5 miles of track recently leased through the George's Creek Valley from Shaft to Westernport, the \$200,000 in funding will be used along the railroad's 16-mile stretch between Cumberland and Frostburg.

Funding sought at the state level, according to Heinz, has changed somewhat in the last year but he is thankful for money for track maintenance. "It's something that I was taught long ago. Your railroad will only be as good as its track," he said. "It's your most substantial piece of equipment you have."

The railroad had been approved for \$1.5 million in state funding dating back to Governor Larry Hogan's last fiscal year, however the administration of Governor Wes Moore reduced that appropriation to the \$200,000 for track maintenance.

Heinz said Moore, who rode aboard the WMSR Polar Express in December, has decided to designate \$1.5 million in capital funds for 2024 for improvements to the rail bridge across the North Branch Potomac River between the WMSR train yard in Ridgeley, West Virginia, and the Western Maryland Railway Station in Cumberland where passengers board. "That will require support from the local delegation as well as others throughout the state," said Heinz. "I will be going to Annapolis speaking with different representatives from all over the State of Maryland to make sure we have support for that. "I will articulate to them the importance of tourism and the family experience that we create."

The \$200,000 allocation will be used for a portion of track near Frostburg, according to Heinz. "The funding is mostly all tie replacement. "We have actually been doing track work out of our own operating budget for some time," added Heinz. "A lot of the (current grant allocation) will replenish money we spent last year."

Heinz said 80 ties were installed the end of January and early February. The work is done a third by WMSR staff and the rest by Rhinehart Railroad Construction.

Railroad tracks, according to Heinz, are Federally classified by their condition and use. He said the WMSR track is predominately Class 1, approved for 15 mph with two miles of it approved at Class 2, which is 30 mph. Heinz said to maintain track at Class 2 it would require an estimated \$1.1 million per year. "This year alone we will do an investment of \$500,000 from our normal operating budget," he said.

Heinz said the WMSR, which reported a sizable increase in ridership in 2023, wants to maintain a high quality service and offer new excursions. He said the railroad will likely add features including beer trains featuring local breweries. "But for me it is important that we continue to bring in families," said Heinz. "We want mom and dad and the grandparents coming back. As long as we are doing that we can't lose. The No. 1309 will be back out mid-summer. It's cool to have the equipment. "But what really tells us if we are doing it right or wrong is the moms and dads and grandmas and granddads. If the kids are having a good time we

know we are hitting it out of the park." (Cumberland Times-News)

WESTERN MARYLAND SCENIC TO EXPAND. The Western Maryland Scenic Railroad has signed a long-term lease to acquire the Georges Creek Railway, a dormant short line in Maryland's southwestern Allegany County, which the railroad plans to use for "passenger and potential freight opportunities," according to a press release.

The newly acquired line will be known as Western Maryland Scenic's Georges Creek Division, and will be structured as a separate business managed by WMSR. WMSR Executive Director Wesley Heinz said the agreement follows more than two years of discussions with Georges Creek owner Eighteen Thirty Group, which purchased the line out of bankruptcy in 2006. The railway ceased operations in 2019 following the closure of a paper mill it served in Luke, MD.

The Georges Creek line is a former CSX branch, and Heinz said CSX and some businesses have occasionally approaches WMSR about the possibility of providing limited freight service. "CSX has been courteous enough to identify opportunities for WMSR, and the Georges Creek Division could help us fulfill these requests," Heinz said. "Our staff has spent countless hours imagining a revitalization of the railroad line and how WMSR can use their vision to bring economic development to the Georges Creek valley through tourism and rail services."

The new property also gives WMSR greater opportunities for expansion in the wake of growth that has seen it go from more than 47,000 passengers in 2021 to almost 75,000 in 2023.

"The WMSR doesn't own the railroad between Cumberland and Frostburg," Heinz said. "The ability to expand our schedule is limited in its current configuration. The Georges Creek Division initiative allows the Scenic to craft our future as we see fit. The small towns along the 'CRIK,' with their charm and Americana, provide a broad canvas for our staff to create new experiences for all visitors to enjoy."

Heinz said he and Eighteen Thirty Group owner Duncan Smith share a passion for history and seeing local communities continue to develop. "Our first order of business will be to attend to the overgrowth of vegetation along the right-of-way, identify safety needs, and communicate with the community leaders along the 'CRIK' on how the WMSR can encourage and diversify tourism throughout the valley," Heinz said. "There is a strong desire for bike trails to accompany the railroad alongside the Georges Creek. WMSR feels we are in an excellent position to create the partnerships needed to replicate the success of the much larger Great Allegheny Passage. The small-town communities along Georges Creek can benefit from WMSR's desire to be a key economic driver in the region."

The line, originally the former Cumberland & Pennsylvania, was purchased by the Western Maryland Railway in 1944. CSX operated it until 2005, when it ceased operations because of a combination of washouts and declining traffic. Separately, the railroad announced on Facebook that it would need additional diesels for the Georges Creek Division and has purchased a pair of former Western Maryland GP9s. (Trains News Wire)

MAERSK WILL USE TRAINS TO AVOID THE PANAMA CANAL. A.P. Moller-Maersk will use trains to avoid the drought-hit Panama Canal for some of its vessels, the Danish shipping giant said, as low water levels have caused one of the world's main maritime trade routes to reduce crossings.

The workaround comes as vessel owners also are rerouting ships to avoid militant attacks that are disrupting the Suez Canal, its longtime rival trade shortcut, in what has become the largest disruption to ocean shipping since the covid-19 pandemic.

The Panama Canal Authority has reduced the amount and weight of vessels passing through based on current and projected water levels in Gatun Lake, the

rainfall-fed principal reservoir that floats ships through the canal's lock system, said Maersk, one of the largest container shipping companies.

The Panama Canal Railway is a 47-mile railroad running adjacent to the canal that connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. (Reuters via Washington Post)

VRE FARES TO INCREASE BY 5% - FREE RIDES WILL BE EXTENDED TO ANYONE UNDER 18. The new budget for the Virginia Railway Express (VRE) includes plans for a fare hike and an expansion of service. Starting July 1, fares will go up by 5%, which (for the longest trips in the system) would cost about 50 cents more. However, anyone under 18 will be able to ride for free. Currently, only kids age 10 and younger may ride for free when traveling with a paying adult. The railway said the changes are designed to get riders back on the system and cover increases in costs of labor, trains and parts due to inflation.

The approved budget also cleared the way for Saturday service. The railway shares the tracks with CSX, Norfolk Southern and Amtrak, so they will have to agree on schedules for when Saturday service could start.

Similar to many other public transportation services, VRE said ridership has not fully recovered since the pandemic. This will be the first fare increase on the railway since 2020.

Metro has proposed similar fare hikes as a way to close a large budget gap. (News 4 Washington)

MARYLAND MAY RENEW FUNDING FOR MARC COMMUTER RAIL LINE. Maryland Governor Wes Moore's Fiscal 2025 budget proposal includes \$150 million in restored funding for transportation projects across the state, including \$8 million for the continued operation and expansion of MARC's Brunswick Line into West Virginia, the Frederick News-Post reported. Some of the funds would also go toward a pilot program offering a new mid-day service option.

Expansion of service on the Brunswick Line was in jeopardy late in 2023, when the Maryland Department of Transportation identified a \$3.3 billion deficit in its capital program for the fiscal years 2024 through 2029. In response to the shortfall, Moore proposed to pull state funding from several planned transportation improvements across the state, including the Brunswick MARC expansion. Now the funding for the expansion will be restored, if the Maryland General Assembly approves.

The Brunswick Line operates between Washington, D.C., and Martinsburg, WV, with a branch to Frederick, MD. It is MARC's second longest route at 74 miles, and is operated under contract to MARC by Alstom. It runs on CSX over former Baltimore & Ohio track and is a successor to commuter services provided by B&O on the route dating to the 19th century. (Trains News Wire)

AN UNUSED RAIL CORRIDOR IN THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY SPARKS A FIGHT OVER WHAT'S NEXT. Two groups in the Shenandoah Valley are at odds over what to do with an unused railway after the General Assembly pledged \$35 million toward its conversion into a rail trail.

The nearly 50-mile rail corridor, which was first established in the 1850s, runs from Front Royal to the town of Broadway in Rockingham County and is currently owned by Norfolk Southern Corporation. As interest declined in freight service, NS began to discontinue sections of the corridor beginning in 1989.

Nearly 30 years later, community organizations and local communities began considering a trail to replace the existing rail line. With permission from NS, Virginia completed a field survey in 2021 and then produced a study on the feasibility of developing a linear park along the corridor.

Last year, the General Assembly appropriated up to \$35 million, as part of a \$245 million package, to buy land for the railtrail and conduct initial planning

and site development. Language in the state budget noted that any land acquisition for the trail "shall not preclude the consideration of options to maintain rail transportation in the corridor."

Now, a group known as the Shenandoah Rail Corridor Coalition has emerged with an opposing plan: restoring the railroad and constructing a trail alongside it. Earlier this February, The Northern Virginia Daily reported the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation, which is part of the coalition, had negotiated a letter of intent with NS to purchase the rail corridor for \$23 million. The goal, said Foundation CEO Keven Walker, was to develop a 450-acre linear park around an excursion and freight railway. "It can be the same beautiful resource that the 'trails only' folks are envisioning, but it can have the added benefit of these other economic drivers, which are so important for the Valley," Walker told the Mercury. He said the coalition has raised over \$40,000 for the project and generated significant interest since its announcement.

Don Hindman, Project Director for the Shenandoah Valley Rail Trail Exploratory Partnership, an 18-member group that supports converting the corridor into a trail, said news of the agreement was like "a punch in the nose."

As the groups argue about the best use for the corridor, a second feasibility study to look at a "broad variety of potential options," including a combination of rail and trails, is being pursued by the Virginia Secretary of Transportation. "We continue to meet with stakeholders, including the Friends of the Shenandoah Trail and the Shenandoah Battlefields Foundation – who share a passion for bringing their visions to the valley," the office wrote in an email to the Mercury. Hindman said he was "anxious and I think our partnership is anxious to hear that study for the new feasibility study has commenced."

A PUSH FOR A RAIL TRAIL

Over the last six years, groups including the Alliance for the Shenandoah Valley, Civil War Trails and the Virginia Tourism Corporation have joined with local governments like Rockingham, Shenandoah, and Warren counties and a handful of towns to back the idea of converting the existing railway into a multi-use trail. Kyle Lawrence, Executive Director for the Shenandoah Valley Bicycle Coalition, said creating a single trail for pedestrians and cyclists is the best use for the corridor. "If we thought you could bring rail back, we wouldn't have started this project," Lawrence said. He added, "It's not a question for me whether or not you should or shouldn't be next to a train, it's whether it's the best use of the corridor. So given that as a single-track corridor, it's very unlikely that you can build an accessible trail."

Hindman too said there is not enough space for both the existing railway and a new trail, since most of the corridor is approximately 60 to 66 feet wide and is very steep and narrow on both sides.

Supporters of the rail trail say the project would help grow tourism, create new business opportunities and help preserve the existing corridor. A 2021 economic impact analysis prepared by economist Robert Cline for the Shenandoah Rail Trail Exploratory Partnership found the rail trail as envisioned could generate an estimated \$32 million when completed.

"The Shenandoah Rail Trail effort has been a fully transparent process, with opportunities for community input at every step, including a feasibility study, a [Virginia Department of Transportation] survey with over 9,000 responses (the most they've had for any project), and a series of 10 community input meetings in each of the towns," the partnership argued in a press release after the battlefields foundation's announcement. "If that funding is to be reallocated to a different concept, partners believe it is imperative that equal transparency and due-diligence be performed to ensure taxpayers dollars will support the project with the greatest public use and benefit."

RAIL-WITH-TRAIL

The Shenandoah Rail Corridor Coalition meanwhile has argued a new trail can successfully coexist alongside a revitalized rail track, tapping into a growing embrace of the "rails-with-trails" concept. Between 2002 and 2018, the number of rails-with-trails projects across the U.S. grew from 65 to 434, according to a March 2020 report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Transportation.

"Well-designed rails-with-trails have the potential to provide safe, accessible infrastructure that encourages and enables people to walk and bike for both transportation and recreation as part of their daily lives," the report found. However, it cautioned, "rails-with-trails are not appropriate in every situation, and developing one requires a collaborative approach among railroads, trail developers, and communities to address safety, capacity, and liability issues."

Seeking to preserve the existing rail corridor for freight and potentially passenger use, the coalition is pushing for what it calls "Trails Plus," a plan that would include a recreational trail that runs parallel to a scenic railroad route and access to parking, shops and amenities. The final result, its backers say, could resemble the Great Allegheny Passage Trail in Western Maryland. Walker said excursion rail, designed for special events, is "booming" in parts of the country, and there are potential rail operators that are anxious to operate along the corridor. He also said with traffic growing on Interstate 81, the use of rail to distribute goods could help ease congestion.

"Our 'Trails Plus' plan, we see as being the very best benefit for the people in the Valley, as well as the people of Virginia, because it expands the benefit to a larger segment of Virginia's population," Walker said. "You're gonna have a lot more users of that corridor and a lot more people benefiting from the 'Trails Plus' concept than we would with the 'trails only' concept."

On its website, the coalition has said the assumption that the railway isn't viable since NS hasn't reactivated it is incorrect.

"The railroad remains unsold," the group pointed out before noting the public held similar views on the 20-mile Shenandoah Valley Railroad that runs between Staunton and Pleasant Valley in Rockingham, which was considered "unsavable" before its rehabilitation. Today, the line handles approximately 2,100 carloads per year with CSX and NS.

The Shenandoah Valley Battlefields National Historic District has also argued the trails-only plan would destroy the "historic integrity" of the railroad and "prevent any realistic possibility of using the railroad in the future." "Anyone who would support or promote that plan – a plan that calls for the destruction of this historic rail line – is not preservation-minded or does not have the capacity to understand the project and its alternatives," the group wrote. "Period. That's it."

LEGISLATORS REVIEW

Lawmakers representing the region said they're weighing the options.

Del. Tony Wilt, R-Rockingham, who before redistricting represented the district that contains the corridor and put forward the budget request to study the trail in 2020, said he was tired of seeing "defunct tracks" and "nothing going on." "If we can get it out of the railroad's hands for someone to use and put it back into use, then I think that's a good idea," Wilt said.

Del. Chris Runion, R-Rockingham, said while he hasn't reviewed the coalition's rail-with-trail proposal, he likes the idea of creating a multi-modal corridor that could serve cyclists, tourists interested in visiting the region's historic battlefields, freight lines and passenger lines stopping at neighboring colleges and universities like James Madison University. "As a legislator, let's figure out how to use our resources over periods of time so it can be generational and impactful," Runion said. "I want to see a collaborative venture. It doesn't just mean bicycles or trains, it means everything."

House Minority Leader Todd Gilbert, R-Shenandoah, said he's been surprised by the latest developments related to the corridor but looks forward to the state's second study. "I've always maintained that I wanted to see the corridor put to the highest and best use, and if that was purely recreational in nature, then so be it; if it meant we can restore freight rail and perhaps scenic rail, and that was certainly a viable option along with a recreational trail, then certainly that was interesting," Gilbert said. "I'm just in a posture where I'm just taking everything in." (Virginia Mercury) www.virginiamercury.com

THE AGE OF STEAM ROUNDHOUSE MUSEUM is pleased to share that former Bessemer and Lake Erie Railroad steam locomotive #643 has arrived in Sugarcreek, Ohio, on January 31, 2024. This massive 2-10-4 will now be unloaded, reassembled, and restored for display in AoSRM's 18-stall roundhouse facility.

This occasion marks the conclusion of a 4+ year project to extract the locomotive from its longtime home in McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania. The tender of #643 made the trip via truck several years ago, but the boiler and frame traveled via heavy-duty railroad flatcars. Due to its proximity to active rail lines, utilities, public roadways, and other obstacles, moving #643 to Sugarcreek was a complicated process involving tireless coordination with many different organizations and stakeholders.

As just one example of this collaboration, #643's railroad journey involved three distinct railroad hand-offs ("interchanges") and movement in nine different trains to arrive at the Roundhouse. We thank our friends at CSX Transportation, Norfolk Southern Railway, and Genesee and Wyoming Inc. for helping #643 arrive safely and efficiently. The arrival of 643 also fulfills a longtime dream of AoSRM Founder Jerry Jacobson, who long dreamt of adding the locomotive to his stable of historic steam locomotives. "The King," as Jerry called it, will now be well-cared for and on public display for the first time in decades because of Jerry's vision. We look forward to sharing this incredible representative of America's industrial heritage with Roundhouse visitors. Tickets for tours and events are available at www.ageofsteamroundhouse.org.

Some statistics and historical information on #643, as written in the acquisition announcement from 2019: B&LE #643 is a heavy-haul steam locomotive that was designed and built to move iron ore, coal, and other high-density commodities to and from the Great Lakes region. Built in 1944, the 643 saw an early retirement in 1952 due to the increased introduction of diesels to the Bessemer & Lake Erie's locomotive roster. Fortunately, the 643 and two other smaller steamers were preserved by the B&LE in its roundhouse in Greenville, PA.

B&LE 643 will become the largest locomotive in the AoSRM collection. This behemoth is just over 108' long, stands over 16' high, and weighs 308.32 tons without coal and water. Add 26 tons of coal, and 23,000 gallons of water, and B&LE 643 tops the scales at 908,720 lbs., or more than 454 tons!

AMTRAK ACELA TRAINS GET A NEW HOME AT BALTIMORE'S PENN STATION. On January 29th, Baltimore's Penn Station had a ceremonial ribbon cutting for a new platform that will serve Amtrak Acela trains this spring. The new platform represents the latest improvement at Baltimore's Penn Station, the 113-year-old passenger rail hub that is undergoing an overhaul to expand its capacity and restore its luster.

The addition will free up the station's existing platforms for other Amtrak trains, as well as commuter trains that run on the MTA's MARC service. Trains can start pulling into their new home at Penn Station this spring after Amtrak finishes leveling track along the length of the platform. Construction on another new platform, for two tracks that will service MARC commuter trains, is expected to wrap up this fall, an Amtrak official said. The renovations will double the number of platforms at Penn Station and ease timing and congestion issues. (Baltimore Banner)

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