

## **An Update Statement about the DC2RVA Rail Project**

The Hanover Chamber in its role as an observer and reporter of local issues affecting both businesses and property rights, while working to make our area a better place to live, work and play, and as a champion for the economic vitality of Hanover County and the Town of Ashland brings forth the following statements. Our primary desire in this statement is to share a perspective encompassing interests, needs and long-term goals of our greater business community and membership.



### **Background & Process**

As promised to our members, the Hanover Chamber has followed the DC2RVA Rail Project closely over the past many months. In response to comments and questions raised by Ashland and Hanover citizens/organizations, the Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) held back on releasing study information, through the EIS II study, and formed a Community Advisory Committee (CAC). This team is comprised of representatives from Hanover County, the Town of Ashland, Randolph-Macon College, CSX, concerned area citizens and members of Families Under the Rail and key DRPT staff and railway consultants. The CAC has had numerous meetings, some public and others not, in hopes that they could together propose “agreeable” solutions for how rail will expand in the Hanover and Ashland areas. The timetable has now come to a fast close.

The DRPT has said they will present CAC recommendations at the September meeting of the CTB (VA Commonwealth Transportation Board) who will then make final recommendations to the FRA (Federal Railroad Administration) in December 2017. The FRA’s decision will come in Spring 2018. For the CAC’s recommendations to truly be considered, they must narrow and prioritize options. At the most recent meeting on August 26, a few of the 12+ options were eliminated but they did not make final decisions. Many CAC members requested one more meeting to do so before they share with the CTB. It was decided that there will be a final public CAC meeting on Monday, September 11. In the meantime, the Town of Ashland has had a final workshop/town hall to discuss narrowing in-town options and the County will have meeting/town hall about narrowing both western and eastern bypass options. The bottom line for the CAC is they must jointly present a ranking list of options that include at least one from each of the four main categories – through town, below town, western and eastern. Truly, it is no easy task and we know appreciate the challenge that proposes.

It is also worthwhile to keep in mind the intended timeframe of this project. All models were based on proposed numbers and figures beginning in 2040. This project, so long as funding exists, will not begin until 15-20 years from today. That does not negate the need to consider the project carefully; we have a responsibility to deliberate the development our locality in the future and we know that a lack of response to this issue infers a decision made for us rather than with us.

### **Alternatives, Considerations & Viability**

In reviewing all options from each of the four main categories, we considered five principal questions:

- 1) How many people, parcels, properties and businesses are affected?
- 2) What will/could be lost and/or gained?
- 3) How impactful will the construction process be?
- 4) How likely is an option to be chosen?
- 5) How will the outcome affect our community long-term?

This stated, here are a few notable comments about various alternatives.

Maintaining three tracks through Ashland in the “3-2-3” model discussed often, is unlikely to be supported by CSX because they believe it will cause too much freight backup, and therefore does not appear viable. Though we see this option as having the least impact to current and future properties, maintains the character of the town long-term and requires the least construction, the freight concerns significantly lessen the likelihood of this alternative to be chosen. Another through-town option, adding a third track at grade, will ruin the charm and character of Ashland for the future while also reducing land and business value for all properties, homes and businesses along the tracks; so is not viable.

The eastern bypass alternatives that suggest using the I95 median impose a restriction on any future widening or significant improvements to the interstate, which are likely and potentially necessary, so they do not appear viable. Other alternatives that made it through to final stages all affect a very high number of parcels, have likely impacts to parks and public spaces, require high numbers of new at grade crossing decisions and so do not appear viable.

The western bypass alternatives all affect properties and parcels not currently affected by rail travel and reduce land value in every case. While these options affect fewer people during construction than some other options, the outcome of build and railways created cannot outweigh the significant cost to families and land owners. Additionally, the cost of the proposed options is comparable to better options making these less viable.

The below ground, in-town alternatives appear most viable. By keeping tracks within their current paths, there is less lasting negative impact to parcels, homes and businesses. The area gains accessibility for all kinds of vehicular traffic, including emergency response vehicles, and reduces current safety concerns related to cars and pedestrians on or around the railway. The tunnel options are of the most expensive alternatives, making them unlikely to be chosen and so less viable.

## Final Remarks

Therefore, the alternative that presents itself as the most viable is the three-track trench below ground within the Town of Ashland. The outcome provides solutions to safety needs and a usable and inviting community space for the future. The cost of the build is comparable with other options. Notably, this trench will impose a difficult situation for residents and business owners during the build process. During the two-four years of construction, access and usability all around and in the Town will be hindered or halted. Should this alternative be chosen, we would like to see special attention to and leniency on temporary easements, as well as, considerations and compensations to be made for property owners on the tracks and especially business owners along the tracks.

We recognize that the DC2RVA rail project will have direct effects on both the Town of Ashland and Hanover County. Additionally, we acknowledge that no alternative is without fault and that other unintended consequences may arise from the project. Yet, we appreciate the need to plan for the future and know that growing pains often parallel change. The Chamber commends the DRPT office for agreeing to and seeing to this lengthier process of deliberation and thanks each CAC member for their time, commitment and participation the past months.

*Respectfully submitted by the Hanover Chamber of Commerce Partnerships Committee, fully considered and approved by the Hanover Chamber of Commerce Executive Committee this September 11, 2017.*