

# Richmond Times-Dispatch

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## Passenger Rail: Drill, Baby

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By [STAFF REPORTS](#)

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Yesterday Virginia launched its first state-funded city-to-city passenger trains. The three-year, taxpayer-subsidized pilot program -- making runs to Washington from Lynchburg and Richmond -- will measure the feasibility of intercity rail. Virginia will shell out several million dollars a year to subsidize the operational side of the endeavor, on top of more than \$100 million in infrastructure improvements.

That's a lot of dough for not a lot of ridership: Planners expect roughly 51,000 passengers a year for the Lynchburg line, which works out to fewer than 200 per day. (Passengers will shell out big money, too. Fares start at \$38 and climb to \$74 -- one way.)

But think of the investment as the equivalent of exploratory drilling for oil: You don't know if the investment is worth the outlay until you put the rigs in gear. Besides, those most inclined to be critical of subsidized rail face a dilemma. Because of their opposition to tax hikes -- or even user fees such as gasoline taxes -- they have been forced to recommend using general-fund tax dollars for transportation. Gubernatorial candidate Bob McDonnell's transportation plan, for instance, relies fairly heavily on infusions from general-fund sources to pay for road improvements.

That marks a shift. As the Cato Institute notes in a recent paper critical of high-speed rail, "gasoline taxes and other user fees covered 100 percent of the cost of the Interstate Highway System." If conservatives in the House of Delegates abandon that approach, as they seem to have done, then they hardly have room to complain about subsidies for rail.

At that point, the only pertinent question concerns efficiency: whether intercity rail can provide a cost-effective alternative. The only way to find out is to try it. And so, to that end -- drill, baby, drill.

### Reader Reactions

Posted by ( [DarnYankee](#) ) on October 02, 2009 at 8:01 am

People who are really looking for oil don't go about drilling holes willy-nilly. They look for certain indicators that oil is present, e.g., certain geologic formations are more likely to harbor oil reserves than others. With only 200 riders per day, it already sounds like Lynchburg is a dry hole.

I have no quarrel with rail transportation, but the fares should cover the cost of the ride, similar to buying a

bus ticket. The arguments about subsidies that other forms of transportation receive are red herrings.

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Posted by ( hahaha ) on October 02, 2009 at 6:50 am

Public risk, private profit.

The rich man's way.

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