

THE ROANOKE TIMES

roanoke.com

Wednesday, August 03, 2005

NS on track for upgrade

By [Lois Caliri](#)

981-3117

Finding a compatible site for an intermodal hub in or near the Roanoke Valley might be daunting, though.

Norfolk Southern finally got its request: federal money to upgrade its main line to carry double-stacked freight containers between Roanoke and Columbus, Ohio.

"It's been years in coming," said Jeff Heller, assistant vice president of international marketing at NS.

Congress last week appropriated \$90 million for this project that encompasses Virginia, West Virginia and Ohio. Of that, \$5 million is earmarked for Virginia.

This new rail network also plows ground for NS to build intermodal freight yards in the Roanoke Valley and in Prichard, W.Va. In those yards, freight containers will be transferred between trucks and rail cars.

When completed, the line, known as the Heartland Corridor, will provide a direct route between Chicago and Norfolk, and all markets in between.

For the most part, the money would be used to raise tunnel clearances. Of the 29 NS-owned tunnels in Virginia and West Virginia, four are in Virginia.

Heller said NS would use some of the federal monies to help build the intermodal yards.

Finding a compatible site for an intermodal hub in or near the Roanoke Valley might be daunting, though.

Two economic development leaders said large, flat parcels with ready rail and highway access are in short supply, if available at all.

Proximity to residential neighborhoods also must be considered because of concerns about truck traffic, noise or industrial lighting, said Phil Sparks, executive director for the Roanoke Valley Economic Development Partnership.

Sparks said he will meet next week with members of the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission to discuss a site search.

"Roanoke County is a prime prospect," said Rep. Bob Goodlatte, R-Roanoke.

Heller said it's too early to discuss sites.

First things first.

Tunnel clearance, the most expensive aspect of the Roanoke-to-Columbus portion of the Heartland Corridor, is top priority. The estimated cost is between \$120 million and \$150 million.

NS officials will look to the ports and state rail funds for some extra help. NS' contribution is not yet determined.

Until now, Virginia had no trust-fund allocation for rail, according to a rail enhancement report that was submitted to Gov. Mark Warner on Dec. 1. The majority of state transportation funds went to highways, with small shares to urban transit, ports and airports.

But the tide has turned.

One needs to look at intermodal traffic, Heller said. "You get a lot more infrastructure for your dollar when it's spent on intermodal versus the highway."

Intermodal, he said, provides a more efficient way of moving goods, and it's more environmentally friendly because less fuel is consumed.

NS purchased 300 acres to replace an intermodal site in Columbus. "Roanoke's yard will be substantially smaller," Heller said.

The tunnel-clearance projects are expected to begin next year and could be done in 2009. Accordingly, NS is several years away from building an intermodal terminal in the Roanoke Valley. The chosen site will have access to the railroad and to a highway.

Preliminary engineering studies are under way to prepare for tunnel clearance.

NS will either raise the roof of the tunnels or lower the track bed.

Heller said he expects NS will need state and federal environmental permits for the projects.

He said NS will probably ask contractors to bid on the projects.

Relating to the Heartland Corridor, Congress also appropriated \$15 million to relocate a rail line belonging to Commonwealth Railway to connect NS with a new terminal in Portsmouth. Maersk-Sealand, a Danish shipping line, is building the terminal, allowing the transfer of cargo between ships, rail and trucks.

"We believe more and more business will move from Asia through the East Coast ports," Heller said. "We need this additional infrastructure to move increased volumes of cargo into the hinterland."

Even if improving clearance is a major investment, several rail companies, notably in North America, have invested massively in double-stacking projects, said Jean-Paul Rodrigue, an assistant professor of geography at Hofstra University.

"With the substantial growth of international trade and the acute trade imbalances, gateway ports are facing increasing pressures to handle additional traffic, most of it containerized," Rodrigue said in an e-mail to The Roanoke Times. Many of them are coping reasonably well. "The major problem relies on linking these ports with their hinterland."

He said the Hampton Roads port has been active in promoting such linkages, beginning with the Virginia Inland Port near Front Royal and now this more efficient double-stack connection with Chicago.

Excluding engineering and funding challenges, "the most significant potential impairment is short-sighted NIMBYism coming from local interests who may oppose such projects on the ground of local environmental disruptions and disturbances," Rodrigue said. If that opposition succeeds, the outcome is more road traffic, energy consumption, pollution and delays, resulting in higher costs, which eventually are passed to the consumer, he said.

There also are strategic issues at play, he said. As the price of oil continues to rise, there are good reasons to reinvest in rail freight.

Goodlatte said the Heartland Corridor will enhance Virginia's

access to global markets and will make Southwest and central Virginia more attractive places to do business. "The Heartland Corridor also makes Norfolk a more viable port."

Staff writer Duncan Adams

contributed to this report.

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