



Shenandoah Valley Network

October 27, 2011

Dr. James A. Davis
Commonwealth Transportation Board Commissioner, Staunton District
504 Marion Street
Winchester, VA 22601

SENT VIA EMAIL AND US MAIL

Dear Dr. Davis,

Following the Interstate 81 discussion at the Commonwealth Transportation Board meeting last week, I thought it would be prudent to share with you our perspective of the strong support for rail in the Shenandoah Valley. Over the past seven years, there has been sustained effort by local governments, civic groups and residents to urge VDOT to pursue freight rail diversion of through-trucks in the I-81 corridor.

Starting in 2005, local governments endorsing the “Reasonable Solutions for the Future of I-81” resolution called for a multimodal approach to easing safety and congestion problems, including a rail freight component. Augusta, Rockingham, Shenandoah, Clarke and Albemarle Counties, the City of Roanoke and the towns of Front Royal, Tom’s Brook, New Market, Edinburg and Mount Jackson all passed the resolution, as did 21 civic groups, including the Virginia Hospitality and Travel Association and the Shenandoah Valley Travel Association.

In 2006, support for rail freight diversion was widespread in the 2,600 written comments from Valley residents and among the more than 1,000 residents who turned out for VDOT hearings on the then-draft I-81 plan. VDOT later reported that 78 percent of all public comments favored rail freight diversion as a key strategy.

In 2007, Shenandoah County supervisors wrote to VDOT senior officials objecting to the approved I-81 plan, both the sole focus on highway widening and “the elimination of rail freight diversion as a legal option in I-81 planning, which was based on VDOT’s flawed analysis of rail freight *only in Virginia*, when rail freight works best at longer distances.”

Norfolk Southern’s launch in 2007 of the Crescent Corridor freight rail upgrade was well received in the Shenandoah Valley. Local governments and residents hailed projections that the project could divert 750,000 trucks each year by 2013 from I-81 in Virginia, from 10 to 25 percent of the current total. They compared the cost of the \$2 billion national freight rail project to VDOT’s \$11.4 billion plan for highway widening just in Virginia, noting that rail improvements also offer far fewer negative impacts on the Valley’s economy, communities and natural and historic resources.

In December 2010, after freight rail upgrades were completed from Manassas to Front Royal and about to begin on the line through the Page Valley to Elkton, VDOT officials heard further endorsements of rail freight diversion at meetings on I-81 with local government staff and officials. Among others, Chris Price, then director of the Northern Shenandoah Valley Regional Commission, stated “most local governments support rail” at the Winchester meeting, while representatives of Harrisonburg and Staunton expressed support in Verona.

The Shenandoah Valley has demonstrated consistent, broadly-based support for rail freight diversion on I-81, for public investment in rail freight upgrades and for other more efficient, less costly strategies to address congestion and safety problems than the outmoded plan for highway widening outlined by VDOT staff on Wednesday. Your support for rail freight diversion in the I-81 plan would be greatly appreciated by Valley residents, civic groups and local officials.

We thank you for your service on the CTB, and appreciate your consideration of increased support for rail improvements in the I-81 corridor.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kate G. Wofford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the letter "d".

Kate G. Wofford
Executive Director
Shenandoah Valley Network

cc via email: Commonwealth Transportation Board Members