



## **COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

Committee on Libraries, Parks, Recreation  
& Planning Budget: Office of Planning

Statement of  
**Monte Edwards**

On behalf of  
**The Committee of 100 on the Federal City**  
Friday, April 20, 2012

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City (C100) requests that the Council include in the budget for the Office of Planning funds sufficient to study the expansion of rail freight operations as it will affect commuter and passenger rail operations over the shared rail facilities in SW Washington. The C100 will be making the same request next week in the Department of Transportation budget hearing to enable a joint Office of Planning/Department of Transportation study.

### Impact of Increased Freight Traffic on Passenger Train Operations

CSX is proposing to reconstruct the single-track freight tunnel that crosses the Capitol Hill Historic District under Virginia Avenue SE from 2<sup>nd</sup> Street to 11<sup>th</sup> Street through. CSX is seeking approval to widen the tunnel to accommodate two sets of rail tracks, and to increase its clearance to accommodate double-stacked container freight trains. Its goal is to expand its capacity to carry freight through Washington, DC to points south and north.



Currently, the Virginia Avenue tunnel sets the limit on CSX's carrying capacity along this route. The problem with CSX's solution to this capacity issue is that its effect will simply be to relocate the route's bottleneck to the Long Bridge, a place where passenger rail competes with freight trains and where CSX, by virtue of its ownership of the bridge, will be in a position to limit the number of passenger trains with access to it. *Given that the Long Bridge is the only Potomac River rail crossing within 70 miles of Washington, DC, restriction of its use by passenger trains is likely to have a devastating impact on commuter rail.*



### Planning for Imminent Changes in Freight Rail Needs and Their Impacts on Passenger Trains

This isn't just a hypothetical prospect. East coast freight traffic is expected to increase dramatically starting in 2015 when the widening of the Panama Canal is complete and Norfolk, New York and Baltimore will become the east coast ports to receive the increased number of goods in need of transport. Reconstruction of the Virginia Avenue tunnel will enable CSX to accommodate that increase in demand. But if the capacity of the Long Bridge isn't expanded as the capacity of the Virginia Avenue tunnel increases, then any major expansion of freight service will inevitably come at the expense of passenger rail service. This is an undesirable, yet avoidable outcome -- but only if approval of the reconstruction of the Virginia Avenue Tunnel is conditioned upon a corresponding increase in the capacity of the Long Bridge.

Currently 90 trains a day cross the Potomac on the Long Bridge (that's the rusty bridge, downstream for the 14th Street bridges, the only Potomac River rail crossing within 70 miles). Twenty-eight of those trains are CSX trains that also use the Virginia Avenue

tunnel, and the rest are AMTRAK and VRE trains. West of the Virginia Avenue tunnel, the passenger train tracks enter a tunnel under 1<sup>st</sup> Street, NE that emerges at Union Station.

No one has evaluated the impact of increased freight trains on passenger train capacity. Since the increased capacity of the reconstructed Virginia Avenue tunnel is what will allow the increase in freight traffic, we need a comprehensive evaluation of projected increased CSX freight traffic on the rail tracks in the SW and SE quadrants of our City. That evaluation needs to address the impact of the increased freight traffic on the passenger train operations of AMTRAK and VRE along the rail tracks and the Long Bridge that are shared with CSX, VRE and AMTRAK.

### Rationale for Office of Planning Funding

The Office of Planning has already developed the Maryland Avenue, SW Plan that examines the rail tracks in that area, and is a part of the National Capitol Planning Commission and Office of Planning Ecodistrict Initiative. The Federal Highway Administration and the District Department of Transportation are overseeing the Virginia Avenue tunnel project. The Department of Transportation has received a grant to study the Long Bridge that has not yet begun. It appears there is an absence of systematic coordinated review and oversight of these different initiatives. The initiatives address different segments of the same railroad tracks. But it's all one transportation system that needs to be evaluated using the transportation expertise of the Department of Transportation. The issues involve more than transportation – they are about repairing and restoring the urban fabric, as well as a significant economic development investment in the City that requires the expertise of the Office of Planning. A coordinated, comprehensive, joint planning effort by the Department of Transportation and the Office of Planning is needed to:

- optimize the greatest public benefit from the private initiatives of CSX
- heal the scars in the urban fabric created by earlier infrastructure implementation
- ensure the long term revitalization, growth and sustainability of the historically important Maryland Avenue SW and Virginia Avenue SE corridors
- enhance AMTRAK, VRE and CSX rail service.

The Committee of 100 looks forward to being involved as this initiative moves forward.