

[CVILLERAIL] Virginia Railway Express expands its fleet with 50 new cars

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8/2/06 VRE ON TRACK TO RECEIVE NEW CARS

By Kelly HannonFree Lance-Star

It's official--the Virginia Railway Express can order a new fleet of railcars, which will start arriving next summer.

The Federal Railroad Administration has awarded VRE a \$72 million loan to buy 50 new railcars.

The purchase will let VRE swap its older, scruffier railcars for ones with fresh upholstery, more restrooms and space for luggage and bicycles. All of the new cars will comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and two-thirds will have restrooms.

Last week, the loan was looking a tad precarious.

VRE needed approval from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget by Friday to order the railcars. The Office of Management and Budget was reviewing the railway's credit risk. Missing Friday's deadline would have forced VRE to start the loan application again--delaying the arrival of the new railcars by several years, and potentially raising the price tag by \$25 million.

A number of elected officials came together to ensure VRE could meet the deadline, including U.S. Sens. George Allen and John Warner and U.S. Rep. Jo Ann Davis.

"The funding that I helped VRE secure last week is a good down payment in terms of what will ultimately be needed to enable VRE to provide the kind of reliable, efficient and comfortable rail transit service Virginia commuters and families have come to rely on," Allen said in a news release yesterday.

Davis, who represents Virginia's 1st District, also worked with the Office of Management and Budget and the U.S. Department of Transportation to meet the deadline, said Chris Connelly, Davis' chief of staff.

Davis communicated VRE's important role in taking cars off Interstate 95, Connelly said.

"Time was of the essence in this process, and we all came together to make this happen," Davis said in a news release yesterday.

Virginia House Speaker Bill Howell said while the railcar loan is a boost to the region's transit, VRE needs additional funding.

"The purchase of these new bi-level cars is proof of our regional commitment and that of the Commonwealth to make mass transit a welcome option and not a last resort," Howell said. "But the fact remains that we need not only these railcars, but more if we are going to expand the system, thus securing the necessary funds will be one of our top priorities in the months ahead."

The remaining \$20 million cost of the railcars is being paid with a mix of federal and state grants.

Ten of the new railcars will be cab cars, 20 will be coach cars, and 20 will be coach cars with restrooms.

Eleven railcars ordered by VRE last year should begin arriving in November, and be placed into service during the first quarter of 2007.

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