

Testimony of Steve Roberts before
The Senate Commerce Committee
Field Hearing
December 6, 2000

Senator Cleland,

I am Steve Roberts, project manager for the implementation of the Georgia Rail Passenger Program. I am formerly the Chief Operating Officer for the Virginia Railway Express. I have 24 years of experience in the development of transit and commuter rail operations. VRE's current success is based on the day after day hard work of the management and employees of CSX Transportation, Norfolk Southern and Amtrak.

Georgia's Rail Passenger Program was adopted in November 1999, one year ago. I am an employee of SYSTRA Consulting in a joint venture with Moreland-Altobelli and Parsons Brinckerhoff. The joint venture known as Georgia Rail Consultants was created in response to an invitation from the Georgia Department of Transportation and now their partners in the Georgia Rail Passenger Program, both the Georgia Rail Passenger Authority and the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority. Just as the engineering community has formed a joint venture, so the state agencies have signed a memorandum of agreement distributing the responsibilities in the program implementation under the guidance of the Program Management Team. PMT Vice Chairman Carl Rodenizer has outlined those in some detail.

During this first year significant activities were initiated and advanced:

- Much work has gone into assembling a phased implementation concept for the Multi-Modal Passenger Terminal [MMPT] adjacent to the Five Points MARTA station and many of the Federal agencies with Atlanta offices. In early October the City of Atlanta, Central Atlanta Progress and the Program Management Team hosted a planning charette of community leaders to discuss the MMPT and to ensure that the needs of the Intermodal partners: MARTA, Amtrak, commuter rail, Amtrak, regional bus service and Greyhound are fulfilled. Following the charette serious discussions have begun with adjoining property owners - in particular

Turner and Cousins interests - to knit this important facility into the redevelopment of the downtown core area.

- We have just concluded a major milestone in the evaluation of transportation alternatives to serve - Macon and Athens corridors., what may become the first two commuter lines of seven recommended in earlier work completed by GDOT. We met with the public in May and again in October to examine a number of routes to serve those corridors. These public meetings have been well attended and reflect a keen interest in the problems to be addressed and solved. Meetings were held in Athens, Winder, Lawrenceville, Decatur, Atlanta, Forsyth, Jonesboro, Griffin, and Macon. By this time next year we expect to have advanced each of these corridors to a single preferred alignment, to have completed an environmental analysis, made application for and received grants of the Federal funds either appropriated by the Congress for High Priority Projects or flexed from highway funds and to have ordered locomotives, coaches and buses and begun the critical problem solving process of preliminary engineering.
- In addition to the substantial appropriations [HPP \$68,350,000] for the rail passenger program that accompanied the enactment of TEA-21, the State Transportation Board has within its 2001-2003 Transportation Improvement Program [TIP] \$169,175,000 for a total of \$237,525,000 toward the initial capital investment for track capacity, facilities and rolling stock. This is an unprecedented investment of flexed funds, and a precedent we hope to engage throughout the twelve-year implementation of the rail passenger program. As a result the federal transportation agencies play a critical role in our program. Secretary Slater's "One DOT" initiatives must be fully realized if we are to knit together the administrative processes of Federal Highway, Railroad and Transit Administrations
- We have begun the important process of creating partnerships with both CSX Transportation and Norfolk Southern. As VRE demonstrated, a most important attribute of commuter rail service is public use of existing railroad rights of way. In Georgia these freight railroads are vital to the growth and health of a vibrant state economy that is the envy of many. We expect negotiations to lead to a "win-win-win" outcome. Overall the concept of customer service represents a core value in our "win-win-win"

strategy. We have to be safe, dependable and reliable. The railroads have each outlined a number of core principles for our relationship that will be important to the rail passenger program as well:

1. Capacity: Another term for this is “transparency,” the railroads need sufficient capacity to ensure that both freight and passenger trains run on time, in this case we are working with the freight railroads to develop both an overall program requirement as well as a phased program of improvements and service. Senior officials of both companies are pointing toward a much greater investment in rail capacity to handle expanding freight markets as well.
2. Compensation: The Georgia Rail Passenger Program is intended to be a valuable customer for the railroad companies. Payments made by other commuter rail systems for passenger train access to tracks represents extremely high leverage for the railroads. Measured against return on investment the railroads’ returns on passenger operations are well above their cost of capital.
3. Indemnification: The freight railroads supported the creation of Amtrak and several major commuter railroads in order to be relieved on the risk of liability in the operation of passenger service. This will be a difficult and costly process to resolve. In the main the freight railroads have indicated that they are totally unwilling to assume the risk for passengers.
4. Safety: knowing your many years of service to the state you are aware of the significant number of grade crossings in the Macon Atlanta and Athens Atlanta corridors. We would anticipate the installation of significant protection and warning devices along with an extensive program of grade separations in these two corridors.

Commuter and intercity rail passenger service in Georgia contributes to the smart growth strategies that you continue to champion, rail is an important tool to enhance mobility in the Atlanta region and intercity rail is an important link for the commercial and international travel hub that is Atlanta. Passenger rail in the southeast is an untapped resource in this high growth region of our

nation. It will provide a new trip choice to travelers dealing with already congested roadway and airport facilities.

On behalf of the Georgia Rail Consultants team, we are pleased to be a part of this effort and look forward to extensive opportunities for passenger train travel in Georgia.