

## **Rail on the rise Shamokin Valley line sees growth, has potential for more**

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The once-abandoned Shamokin Valley Railroad is quietly on the rise, spurred by a national growth in rail usage and an improvement in the local economy.

[Jeff Stover](#), executive director of the SEDA-COG Joint Rail Authority (JRA), which owns the Shamokin Valley Railroad, said the volume of cars per year on the short line running from Northumberland Borough to [Locust Summit](#) has always been lower than other authority-owned lines. With the redevelopment of industrial sites in the county and a steadily high trucking cost, industry leaders are more frequently choosing to transport materials via rail.

“The traffic is starting to come back,” Stover said. “It’s been a railroad that’s always had great potential, but it’s slowly blossomed over the years.”

Todd Hunter, chief marketing officer of the North Shore Railroad Co., the JRA operator of the Shamokin Valley Railroad, said the line was up 30 percent between between 2015 and 2016.

“It’s interesting that for about 30 years it’s a declining industry,” Hunter said about railways. “That finally changed in the 1990s. It’s been growing ever since.”

Be ‘ready to go’

In the early 1980s, rail usage was in the midst of a long decline and Conrail sought to abandon numerous short lines statewide. Seeing a need to maintain rail access to industrial sites throughout the [Susquehanna Valley](#), JRA was formed and acquired 82 miles of rail line in 1985.

The 27-mile Shamokin Valley Railroad crosses along a series of industrial sites in the Paxinos/Elysbug area, and a spur shoots off to Shamokin Filler in Coal Township just outside Shamokin. On its main shortline, Shamokin Valley serves Anthracite Industries, Clark’s Feed Mill, DMS, Drug Plastics & Glass, Sealed Air Corp. and the Shamokin Valley Railroad Transload Facility.

During the decline of railroad, companies focused their maintenance funds on the rail sections that were most profitable and ceased spending on sections where industry had closed. Stover said JRA’s mission is to ensure the

rail line is fully operational, even when a factory has shut down, because new business is more attracted to these sites.

“You need to have a railroad that’s ready to go,” he said. “We’re like the custodians.”

In the United States, rail lines are owned privately by railroad companies or by public entities who employ operators to run the lines. [North Shore](#) has served as JRA’s operator since the organization’s inception.

After a bidding process, North Shore was selected in July 2015 to continue as JRA’s operator with a contract renewal beginning July 2017. Other railroads vying for this opportunity have contested the bidding process and the contract is in litigation.

The owners or operators of the lines exclusively haul cars across their sections of tracks with their engines. At intersections where a rail car needs to change directions onto a line owned by a different railroad company, the cars are shifted between the companies’ engines at a rail yard.

#### Connection to SEEDCO

Most of the JRA’s train traffic comes from [Norfolk Southern](#), which runs a line from Harrisburg to Buffalo largely parallel to the [Susquehanna River](#) in this area. At JRA’s rail yard in [Northumberland](#), just north of [Front Street Station](#), cars are shifted from Norfolk Southern engines and redirected onto the Shamokin Valley Railroad.

At the eastern end of the Shamokin Valley Railroad in Locust Summit, the line connects to Reading [Blue Mountain](#) and [Northern Railroad](#).

County Director of Planning and Economic Development [Don Alexander](#) called the access to two other carriers a boon to the Shamokin area.

“Coming in from the other side gives us that option in service,” he said.

Alexander is in the process of marketing several sites located along rail lines in [Northumberland County](#). At the top of his list is SEEDCO, the 750-acre industrial park located off Route 901 in Coal Township that is home to [Reinhart FoodService](#).

Though Alexander recognizes the benefit of amenities at the SEEDCO site, such as its capacity for water and sewage, he said he’s had several prospective businesses come look at the location solely for its rail access.

A large international prospect — whom Alexander would not identify — visited the site in November and spoke with JRA and North Shore about the line’s capacity.

“They had some rather large rail needs,” said Alexander. “We were a serious candidate because of the rail.”

Stover said JRA has continued to maintain and make improvements to the line near SEEDCO in anticipation of an industrial customer moving in. Though the line does not traverse the property, JRA has already successfully lobbied to have a rail siding project placed into the state budget — a necessary prerequisite to having a major project funded.

The cost to bring a rail siding into the heart of SEEDCO is approximately \$3 million, Stover said. He said the JRA will not build the siding to attract business, but if a company committed to moving to SEEDCO under the stipulation of completing the project, JRA would be more than willing to move forward.

“We could possibly go to the state for assistance,” he said.

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