

**Vermont State Rail Plan
Public Information Meeting Summary
Brattleboro, VT
March 25, 2014
6:30-8:30 p.m**

Costa Pappis, Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) Project Manager for the State Rail Plan welcomed attendees. He said the agency updates the State Rail Plan every five years to evaluate what has been accomplished and where the agency wants rail to go in the future. The State Rail Plan encompasses both freight and passenger rail. It lays out policies and identifies projects the agency wants to undertake. VTrans has produced a State Rail Plan for many years but now the federal government requires states to develop a comprehensive plan with specified content areas if the state wishes to receive federal funds for projects. Costa said the purpose of the meeting is to review the draft goals and objectives developed for the plan and to received feedback from the public on these goals, as well as provide an opportunity for public input on needs and opportunities for Vermont's rail system.

A presentation was made by Joseph Barr and Andreas Aeppli, consultants hired by VTrans to develop the rail plan. The consultants gave an inventory of Vermont's rail system, both passenger and freight, outlining ridership figures and freight tonnage.

VTrans is interested in increasing locally generated freight. Some 70% of freight traffic is through-traffic, significantly pulp products generated in Canada and Maine. Ninety percent of Vermont-originated freight is consists of stone products.

Passenger rail is showing steady growth. Passenger boardings and alightings surpassed the 100,000 mark last year. Improvements to the Knowledge Corridor in Massachusetts which will re-route the track to the Connecticut River Line will result in a time savings of about 25 minutes. Financing passenger rail in Vermont has been dramatically impacted by PRIIA (Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act) that requires the state to be responsible for paying the majority of the cost of rail if a rail line is 750 miles or less. Vermont used to pay \$4.5 million/year for passenger rail service and the cost is now over \$7 million/year.

Draft goals for the rail plan were outlined:

- Support the economy by providing rail access to all areas of State so rail can be a strong component of State's economy
- Remove existing weight and clearance restrictions to be connected and competitive in today's environment of 286,000 pounds gross weight and excess height railcars
- Develop programs to assist major rehabilitation or replacement of obsolete bridges, structures, track-work and other infrastructure components required for maintaining safe and efficient operations

- Seek adequate and stable funding, including federal assistance, for rail projects and assure appropriate staffing to support the Agency’s mission
- Cooperate with cities and towns, regions and state agencies in open communication and public outreach to seek balance between needs of railroad and human and natural environment
- Continue to promote efficient rail freight and passenger movement to assure continued environmental, economic and other benefits in use of the rail transportation mode
- Maintain the safest possible network of railroad infrastructure and operations to assure the safety of communities, natural resources, traveling public and railroad employees
- Preserve rail corridors for future transportation use

The following are comments and questions raised by the public, followed by a response by the project team.

Financing Rail

Can’t user fees maintain the railway?

Maintaining short line railroads from user fees is challenging. Fees may cover some of the operating costs, and rarely the needed capital investment.

What do the privately managed rail lines pay the state?

There is a leasing fee and a small share of revenue is paid to the state.

PRIIA has had a big impact on passenger rail costs. Prior to PRIIA, Vermont paid much less operating subsidies - – \$4.5 million/year to over \$7 million/year now. Intercity passenger rail services in more rural areas rarely cover operating costs. The rail plan will consider what entity is best positioned to maintain the state-owned railways – the state, private railroads, or some combination of the two.

Is Vermont prepared to pay for additional trains for the Knowledge Corridor?

VTrans will examine service options.

Ridership

Do you have ridership figures?

In 2013, the Ethan Allen (to Albany) has 21,000 passengers, and the Vermonter (to Springfield) about 72,000. Twelve percent of traffic was intrastate, a much higher percentage as compared to 15-20 years ago when there was little local ridership and almost all people were traveling through the state.

What are three most heavily used stations in Vermont?

The stations with the highest ridership are Essex Junction, White River Junction and Brattleboro.

With all the money invested in rail, it should not take 2-2 ½ hours to go from Brattleboro to Springfield, MA, a distance of 50 miles.

Two stops have been added to the route, a route that does not follow a straight line. Collectively the improvements will shave 1 ½ hours from the trip between St. Albans and New York City.

Chris Porter of the Vermont Rail Network said he believes trains need to be competitive (with other travel) and scaled efficiently. Trains should run with more frequency, spreading costs among more riders. Nationally, experience has shown that if you add a second train to a route where there is only one, ridership increases by 100%. The percentage increase drops as additional trains are added.

Needs and Opportunities

Rail system interconnectivity with transit is very important. Traffic on Vermont's roads on Friday and Sunday evenings is very disruptive during the skiing season. If a coordinated system was put in place where people could get to the ski areas by train and bus, the results would be amazing.

Is there any thinking at the state level about connectivity, that buses are a vital part of the rail network?

Yes, both at the local/regional transit providers, and intercity busing.

Vermont rail could support the local economy by 1) having Vermont food products sold on the trains in café cars and 2) coordinating through the National Main Street Program, a program that could connect visits to Vermont downtowns.

As part of Act 250 developers have to put money into transit. We should capitalize on this to make better connections between rail and buses.

I would like to see 4-5 trains a day to Springfield, MA with through ticketing to points beyond so you don't need two tickets.

VTrans would need to look at that level of frequency through the cost lens; we would have to see how the whole system fits together.

I belong to an association of about 120 farmers. We get organic feed by rail from a supplier based in Barnet. The CT River line is very important to us and our number one priority would be to keep the rail operating.

VTrans understands how important the CT River line is and it is why the agency paid very close attention to the sale of the MMA line, and also pays close attention to any other rail lines that are threatened with closure. Maintaining current rail lines and freight services is a major priority for the agency.

More marketing of trains is needed and bathrooms at the stations need to be upgraded. There are examples here in Vermont where local communities taking initiatives to improve train passengers' experience when they arrive at train stations. In Rutland there are greeters to meet arrivals and volunteers have provided security at Essex Junction Station in response to crime and violence that occurred at the stations.

The tone of this rail plan seems to be status quo, maintaining the system we now have. I would like to see at a minimum a second train added and some advocacy for rail that should be reflected in the plan's language.

Now we have one train in Brattleboro that stops in the middle of the day. It takes three days to get back and forth to New York City. Everyone in this room is heading south and we need better access to Springfield so we can connect to the larger regional network.

The physical improvements in the Knowledge Corridor are extensive and Massachusetts and Connecticut have made a significant commitment to increase service in this corridor.

It is important to coordinate the trains system with the buses. Site the two together. We need to be looking at a multimodal system.

Are there any negotiations to get the train to Montreal? It now stops at St. Albans.

VTrans has obtained a grant to get the track ready between St. Albans and Canada. The more significant need is for a customs pre-clearance facility in Montreal, which would require a new international treaty. But there are still a number of issues to resolve. Who pays for the customs facilities? Who provides the staff? Who will operate the train once it gets to Canada? Who will pay for the trains?

What will be done to incentivize freight rail within Vermont to achieve economic development?

We have a lot of vacant industrial properties along rail corridors in the state that we would like to see used. The longer these buildings remain vacant, the greater the danger is that they will be converted to incompatible uses. A goal of the rail plan will be to increase the use of in-state freight.

The plan should have a goal to increase passenger rail in the Connecticut Valley. The state's emissions reduction goals are quite ambitious. Rail can be part of the solution as more train use will reduce traffic volumes on our roads.

The plan should identify the health benefits of trains. When people walk to a train station they are not driving.

When the bridge between Brattleboro and Hinsdale, NH is replaced, are there any plans to eliminate the at-grade crossing that creates a bottleneck for road traffic?

VTrans indicated that they will look into this question.

If you have a goal of keeping the connection between the Northeast Kingdom and Montreal, what can't the Twin State rail line between Newport, St. Johnsbury and Littleton, NH be revived?

That railroad's infrastructure needs a lot of rehabilitation.

Locally I would like to extend the West River Trail along the NECR line. Will the State Rail Plan address conversion of abandoned rail lines into Rail to Trails?

Our charge is to identify the rail system's need and develop a plan to address them. It is not the intent of the plan to focus on conversion.

The state's energy plan seeks to quadruple rail ridership by the year 2035.

Stations need better bicycle and pedestrian facilities.

There is no way to get to Bradley Airport by train.

Connecticut is looking at this issue.

The meeting adjourned at 8:30 p.m.