

**VERMONT RAIL COUNCIL
MINUTES OF MEETING
NATIONAL LIFE BUILDING
DAVIS 5th FLOOR BOARD ROOM
MONTPELIER, VERMONT
November 16, 2016**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chris Cole (Chair)
Carl Fowler Dave Wulfson
Jeff Munger Chris Andreasson
Joann Erenhouse Charlie Moore
Art Whitman Charlie Baker
Dave Allaire Charles Hunter [via teleconference]

OTHERS PRESENT: Dan Delabruere, VTrans
Michele Boomhower, VTrans
Bob Atchinson, VTrans
Paul Libby, VTrans
Alan Franklin, VTrans
Erin Charbonneau, VTrans
Karen Songhurst, VTrans
Scott Bascom, VTrans
Stephen Smith, VTrans
Barb Donovan, VTrans
Dave Pelletier, VTrans
Larry Donna, VTrans
Costa Pappis, VTrans
Kyle Wells, VTrans
Wayne Symonds, VTrans
Bill Hollister, Amtrak
Kevin Chittenden, Amtrak
Christopher Natale, Amtrak
Bill Rech, Amtrak
Caroline Mailee, Amtrak [via teleconference]
MaryAnne Michaels, VRS
Marzena Zuolen, VRS
Jeffrey Tucker, Dubois & King
Ben Heckscher, Trains in the Valley
Megan Sullivan, Congressman Welch's Office
Scott Burbank, VHB
Aaron Guyette, VHB
John Gaworecki, Amtrak Station Caretaker, Essex
Al Villa, Amtrak Station Caretaker, Essex
Connie Quimby, legislature
Jack Madden, Erdman Anthony
Ron O'Blenis, HDR Engineering
John Wilson, Jacobs Engineering

1. Call to Order & Introductions

Chris Cole called the meeting to order at 1 PM. Introductions were done.

2. Public Comments

None.

3. Approval of Minutes

August 17, 2016

MOTION by Dave Allaire, SECOND by Carl Fowler, to approve the 8/17/16 minutes as written. VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.

4. TIGER 7 Grant Update

Paul Libby reported the TIGER 7 grant was secured for upgrade to passenger service on the western corridor including track work, crossings, and bridge work. The environmental categorical exclusion document is approved. It is hoped to have full agreement from the FRA.

Carl Fowler expressed disagreement with the 2020-2021 completion date for the Ethan Allen Express to Burlington service and the delay for the Middlebury project when full or partial busing could be done. Delay is the enemy of accomplishment. There is public support for the service and strong support in state for passenger and freight.

Chris Cole said he does not share the same concern for the delay in service. The application was thoughtful and it will be a stretch to get the project done in a four year period. There is no direct funding for rail. Federal funding must be transferred from the highway side for signals.

Dave Allaire stated at the meeting in Rutland there were many positive comments about rail and progress that has been made. Rail is dependent on federal funds and the project must be done right.

5. Operation Lifesaver Update

Alan Franklin reported Operation Lifesaver public outreach events at schools, organizations, fairs, and such continue to have good attendance and good response. Three more volunteers for Operation Lifesaver are being vetted. Radio PSAs on rail trespass are being broadcast. Schools along rail lines are being targeted for the Operation Lifesaver outreach.

Chris Cole suggested an update on the outreach process and events at schools near active rail lines be presented at the next Rail Council meeting.

John Gaworecki, Essex Amtrak station caretaker, commented positively on the new walkway along the railroad tracks in Essex Junction between Central Street and the high school.

6. Freight and Construction Topics

Shelburne Salt Delivery Update

Dave Wulfson reported one 135' x 365' salt shed is constructed. Once the state storm water operational permit is received then salt can be unloaded and the facility can operate as planned subject to the decision from Judge Session. The salt shed is a top-of-the-line environmentally friendly facility with storm water runoff protection above what is required and exceeding Act 2250 requirements. Another shed will be built in spring 2017. The salt sheds offer a "savings bank" for salt due to their capacity.

Barton Transload Facility

Dave Wulfson announced an open house will be held in December at the Barton transload facility. Invitations will be sent out. Northern Borders grant money was used to build the track.

Middlebury Tunnel Project

Dave Wulfson reported VTrans asked Vermont Railways to pursue other alternatives so the rail can be closed for a period of time for the tunnel project. There is to be an agreement to use the NECR detour. This will help decrease the cost of the project and expand the work window.

Chris Cole thanked Dave Wulfson and NECR for the time and effort on the detour agreement which is in the best interest of the state and Middlebury.

Norfolk Southern

Dave Wulfson reported a lot of traffic has shifted to Hoosick Junction from Whitehall. PanAm is applying for a transportation grant through NY to improve the interchange at Hoosick Jct. The Rail Council and VTrans may be asked to provide support. The work is on PanAm property, but affects Vermont Railways. The project is \$6 million and includes electrically controlled side track.

Chris Cole stated Vermont cannot offer rail grants. Needs over the entire state rail lines are prioritized. Costa Pappis noted freight down the western corridor into NY is a 286 priority in the State Rail Plan. A grant application was submitted for bridges from Rutland to Hoosick, but the grant was not approved. A similar application will be done again.

GMRR Rail Replacement Project

Paul Libby reported Phase 1 of the GMRR project is done. The bids have been opened for Phase 2. There are six miles of 90 pound track remaining to be done.

Dave Wulfson stated 105 pound track is an improvement, but not up to modern day standards. Getting 90 pound out of the main line is very important.

There was mention of the use of drones to view sections of track for rock slides or other obstructions.

Rail Construction Program Update for SFY2016/2017 Budget

Paul Libby highlighted some of the projects in the construction program (some complete and some active). Projects include bridges, crossings, washout repair, and culverts. There was much cooperation behind the scenes with VTrans and the railroads in order to do the necessary work. Chris Cole added access rights had to be secured from private property owners to get to the job sites. Unlike highway projects there are lots of logistics involved with rail projects.

Al Villa, Essex Amtrak train station caretaker, asked if crossing gates are planned for the crossing on Central Street in Essex Junction (the site of the recent accident with a vehicle). Dan Delabruere said gates are not currently in the program, but VTrans can take a look at the crossing.

7. Passenger Topics*Commuter Rail Study*

Scott Bascom stated VTrans was charged with doing a study on commuter rail service from St. Albans to Essex Junction to Montpelier with connecting service to Burlington. A study advisory committee was formed with rail, bus, Chamber, and economic development people. HDR Engineering was hired as the consultant to do the conceptual evaluation that looks at financial issues, operational issues, cost, and transit demand.

Ron O'Blenis, HDR, reported:

- The study began in spring 2016 with stakeholder and public meetings.
- There is existing Link bus service to Montpelier and St. Albans. Annual operating cost is \$600,000 to Montpelier and \$200,000 to St. Albans.
- Commuter rail service would have stops at Union Station, Montpelier Jct. and downtown, Essex Junction, and Milton.
- Limited peak service (6 roundtrips) would be two trains to St. Albans and four trains to Montpelier. Bus service to St. Albans would be replaced. Some bus service in Montpelier would be needed.
- Comprehensive peak service offers 11 roundtrips.
- Demand home to work (all commuters) Montpelier to Burlington is 1,737, Burlington to Montpelier is 1,096 for a total of 2,833. St. Albans to Burlington is 4,433 and Burlington to St. Albans is 548 for a total of 4,981.
- Total regional demand is 7,814 (Montpelier/Burlington 2,833 plus St. Albans/Burlington 4,981).
- An estimate of 12% rail users (1,100) and 25% bus users (2,210) was assumed.
- Assuming service with a 20 year life minimum and rehab of Montpelier Jct. into town, minimum improvements on the main line, improvement to the wye in Essex Junction on the south side and the addition of a passenger platform, and new equipment the cost of the service would be an investment between \$300 million and \$370 million.
- The state budget for Rail is between \$30 million and \$40 million. The entire budget for VTrans is \$600 million.

- The project would be eligible for FTA funding, but the total FTA funding for transit in the state is \$40 million and there are caveats with the funding (sales tax based on population).
- Other considerations include operating support, subsidy, fare box ratio, access to rail.
- Operating cost for the limited peak service (6 roundtrips) is \$5 million. Cost to the passenger would be \$17 daily to Montpelier and \$2.50 daily to St. Albans.
- Operating cost for the comprehensive peak service (11 roundtrips) is \$9 million. Cost to the passenger would be \$14.10 daily to Montpelier and \$2.40 daily to St. Albans.

Mr. O’Blenis reviewed phasing of the segments and costs, and comparison of what is existing to the cost of new service. Next steps in the study include public meetings in December, the final report submitted in December, and the report presented to the legislature in January. All the information will be posted on the VTrans website.

Chris Cole explained the study was done to answer questions from the legislature on the cost of commuter rail service to Montpelier. Costa Pappis noted the work on the NECR corridor is very expensive (\$50 million grant and \$20 million from the railroad plus \$10 million from TIGER and another \$3 million from NECR and \$4 million from FHWA and another \$4 million match from NECR).

Charlie Baker suggested having a slide show of small commuter rail systems in the country. Carl Fowler pointed out the network omits service south of Burlington to Charlotte, Vergennes, and Middlebury, and using DMU technology which is typically used on smaller commuter rail services. There is agreement the service will not be profitable if run by a government agency and the improvements must first be done.

Amtrak Ridership & Revenue

Alan Franklin reported ridership on the Vermonter was up 8.65% for the quarter. Revenues were up 13%. Vermont on/off was up 3.6%. Bikes on the train are increasing. Pets on the train begins December 2016. Ridership on the Ethan Allen Express was down 3.4% and revenues were down 2.8%. Vermont on/off was down .4%. On time performance for the Ethan Allen Express (about 80%) was better than for the Vermonter.

There was discussion of bikes, skis, and snowboards on the train. Chris Natale said skis must be in a bag or covering and stored in the luggage racks. Carl Fowler suggested the bike racks be used for ski/snowboard storage.

Al Villa, Essex Amtrak train station caretaker, asked if a ticket must be purchased for a cello or base. Bill Hollister said if the item takes up a seat then a ticket must be purchased. Mr. Villa said there were 518 people arriving and leaving the Essex Junction station this week (ridership is up for Thanksgiving).

Station Stop in Windsor Update

Dan Delabruere reported the maximum time savings is up to three minutes if the stop in Windsor is eliminated so the schedule will not be changed and the stop will be retained.

Middlebury Tunnel

Wayne Symonds briefly described the Middlebury tunnel project, noting the two highway bridges in Middlebury are in very poor condition and could be closed so the project needs to move forward. The project is 21' clearance and replacement of the two bridges with a 310' long tunnel. The green space above will be re-established. Tree clearing along the right-of-way began in 2016. In 2017 a temporary access road along the rail will be built along with drainage, a maintenance road, and underground utility infrastructure. In 2018 the road will be closed for 10 weeks and the railroad detoured for bridge construction. Supportive excavation will be done. The area between the bridges will be widened. There will be 20 hour work windows and extended work hours. In 2019 there will be pre-closure in April and May and extended work hours. A 10 week closure period will begin June 1st followed by post-closure activities with extended work hours. Main Street and Merchants Row work and the bulk of the track lowering will be done during this time. At the end of the 10 weeks the final grade will be close to being re-established for the railroad, the tunnel will be set, and mobility re-established for Main Street. At the end of 2019 post-closure the roads reopen. In 2020 work will be done on the rail at the extreme ends of the project. Final landscaping and clean up will also be done. The described project approach is the least risky because the outcome can be predicted.

Dave Allaire said it has been a difficult negotiation for Middlebury, but for the big picture and benefits to freight and passenger rail the project must be done.

Michele Boomhower said agreements are in place with Middlebury. Wayne Symonds said the selectboard is behind the plan as presented because the outcome is predictable and there is less risk versus doing the project piecemeal.

Dave Wulfson commented the schedule depends on Vermont Railways and NECR coming to agreement. There are many considerations: cars, locomotives, employees. To do the project and not impact rail customers means the Vermont Railways operation will double.

Dan Delabruere said the railroads are cooperating. There are components outside the project that have to happen, such as storage of cars.

On Time Performance Report for the Vermonter

Via telephone Charles Hunter, NECR, reported the following:

- The railroad strives to operate in the safest mode and does not take chances.
- There were 60 heat restrictions on the welded rail this summer which slowed the trains.
- The welded rail policy will be reviewed and an amendment filed with the FRA to raise the temperature five degree for heat restrictions. This should reduce the number of heat restrictions issued.

- After track and tie work is complete tonnage is run over the track before the rail is operational again. The track work is nearly complete.
- The rock ledges issue is still under NTSB investigation.
- There are just a few slow orders out (for culvert work, legal action on a crossing in Putney, and timbers).

There was further discussion of slow orders and delays on the NECR line. Dan Delabruere said the best case scenario is to eliminate two slow orders before winter. Alan Franklin reviewed the heat slow orders on the southbound route since June. Dave Wulfson said the delays are due to highway bridge work, not rail work. Alan Franklin reviewed slow orders from Montpelier south to Windsor. Charles Hunter stated there is culvert and bridge work being addressed.

There was discussion of making a temporary adjustment in the schedule due to slow orders. Charles Hunter said Amtrak comes to NECR with any schedule adjustments. Dan Delabruere said it is not likely the schedule will be adjusted for slow orders that will be eliminated, but if the delays will run through the winter then the schedule may need to be revisited. Charles Hunter said NECR is willing to work with Amtrak on a temporary adjustment. Joann Erenhouse said the delay becomes a liability if there is not a performance issue because people are depending on the schedule. MaryAnne Michaels, VRS, suggested doing an MOU so the adjustment is documented. Michele Boomhower suggested Dan Delabruere work with Amtrak and inform the railroad of the resolution. Megan Sullivan asked that Congressman Welch be kept informed as well since the Congressman supported funding to increase the travel speed of the train. Bill Hollister, Amtrak, assured all are aware of the situation. The speed restrictions are causing the schedule delay. There are agreements in place to maintain service and levels of service, but unfortunately the levels have dropped so it may be better to have a temporary adjustment to the schedule. On time performance impacts satisfaction with the service. Help in resolving the NTSB issue would be appreciated. Dan Delabruere said any adjustment in the schedule will be temporary. There is an agreement with the investment of the money to upgrade the line that speeds will be maintained, but that is falling short right now.

Food and Beverage Service on the Vermonter

Carl Fowler reviewed food service across the country on Amtrak including catered service, offering regional foods and beverages, and having an extended selection on the menu. Mr. Fowler suggested hot entre items be offered, menu choices be improved/enhanced, more Vermont foods be offered, First Class accommodations be upgraded, a rolling cart service be offered, and perhaps there should be a partial privatization of the food service.

Christopher Natale, Amtrak, said Amtrak is willing to work with the state. The Vermonter uses a New England regional menu stocked out of Washington D.C. The service is consistent New Haven to Washington, D.C., and comparable to other trains in the market. Vermont products are sold including Cabot cheese, Long Trail Ale, Distler's Maple Sour Dough Pretzels. The Ethan Allen Express is stocked out of NY and is the

same as the Vermonter except a different commissary. Amtrak works with its partners to have local products and menu items. The food service and the foods must meet public health and FDA regulations. Brand recognition is a challenge as is the ability to meet stocking levels and distribution. Options to address food service could be to discontinue food service if this is requested by the state (discontinuing food service would mean over seven hours without food being available to business class passengers), having a caterer provide the food service (the caterer would have to bring all supplies, an attendant and cash register on board as well as meet all FDA regulations; the states manage the vendors), adding a café car in New Haven (the Amtrak café car would be closed, but remain in the train set; the car would have to be stored when not in use and the length of the train in St. Albans is a challenge for turnaround in the winter).

Michele Boomhower suggested doing a pilot for food service on the Vermonter and doing a cost analysis of the options. Chris Andreasson said the load factor north of Springfield is low and would not support a comprehensive food service. Carl Fowler said there are alternatives within the current service to make a better produce.

There will be further discussion of food service on Amtrak at the next meeting.

8. Other Business

Next Meeting

MOTION by Carl Fowler, SECOND by Chris Andreasson, to schedule the next Rail Council meeting on February 19, 2017. VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.

Agenda

- Food service

9. Adjournment

MOTION by Carl Fowler, SECOND by Chris Andreasson, to adjourn the meeting. VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:04 PM.

RScty: M.E.Riordan