

**VERMONT RAIL COUNCIL
MINUTES OF MEETING
VERMONT STATE HOUSE
ROOM 11
MONTPELIER, VERMONT
February 17, 2016**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chris Cole (Chair)
Carl Fowler Dave Wulfson
Charlie Baker Chris Andreasson
Dave Allaire Charles Hunter
Charlie Baker Herb Russell

OTHERS PRESENT: Richard Tetreault, VTrans
Dan Delabruere, VTrans
Bob Atchinson, VTrans
Michele Boomhower, VTrans
Costa Pappis, VTrans
Trini Brassard, VTrans
Stephen Smith, VTrans
Joel Perrigo, VTrans
Erik Filkorn, VTrans
Alan Franklin, VTrans
Barb Donovan, VTrans
Karen Songhurst, VTrans
Bill Hollister, Amtrak
Kevin Chittenden, Amtrak
Christopher Natale, Amtrak
Chris Parker, VRAN
Allison Crowell Demag, RRAV
MaryAnne Michaels, VRS
Selden Houghton, VRS
James Westcott, VHB
Jim Gish, Town of Middlebury
Dean George, Town of Middlebury
Amy Sheldon, State Representative from Middlebury

1. Call to Order & Introductions

Chris Cole called the meeting to order at 1:02 PM.

2. Public Comments

None.

3. Approval of Minutes

December 16, 2015

**MOTION by Dave Allaire, SECOND by Charlie Baker, to approve the 12/16/15
with the following amendment:**

Page 3, paragraph beginning “Carl Fowler mentioned constructing a freight yard...” – insert “the difficulty in getting approvals to construct a new” after “mentioned” and delete “constructing a”.

VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.

4. Middlebury Tunnel Project

Richard Tetreault gave a presentation on the Middlebury rail tunnel which has safety and bridge/track maintenance issues. The following was highlighted:

- Project objectives include increased safety, replacement of bridges, maintaining existing roadway grade over the tunnel, and improving the village green area.
- Tunnel height will be 21' 0" which will provide the clearance needed now and in the future. There are some clearance restrictions on the line of less than 21' two of which are in Middlebury.
- Cost estimate is \$40 million at 60% of the design. Construction will begin in 2016 and be complete in 2019.
- VTrans is working with the railroad to shorten the impact of the project construction time on the community as much as possible.

Dave Allaire said he has been requesting more information on the tunnel due to the impacts of the project and work on the western corridor. Having a point person to communicate project progress is a good idea. Mr. Allaire asked if there is any impact on the work on the western corridor. Trini Brassard said the work on the corridor could actually be accelerated if there are longer work windows.

Dean George, Town of Middlebury, said the project is critical for Middlebury and has been under discussion for over a decade. There are significant historic buildings adjacent to the rail that have been restored and are in use so these buildings must be protected. The report on the tunnel clearance has finally been received which is good. The business community by the tunnel is very fragile and there is worry about 20 hour workdays being disruptive. The impact on the downtown needs to be minimized and the project needs to get started as soon as possible. Jim Gish is the community liaison for the project. The local project team is pushing the contractor on ways to decrease impacts.

Charles Hunter asked about the overall cost and source of the funding. Mr. Tetreault said there is \$500,000 lump sum from the town to accommodate improvements to the green and a 95/5 split of federal/state funding.

Chris Cole assured VTrans has heard the concerns and is working to best represent local, state, and railroad interests. Dave Wulfson added the railroad realizes how sensitive the area is by the tunnel. An exemption from the Transportation Board was requested for the 21' clearance which is not the new state standard for clearances, but a compromise to accomplish the Middlebury project. Chris Cole said the question of height for double stack cars was going to be put forth to the Rail Council, but it was felt there would not be double stack containers coming into Burlington.

5. Operation Lifesaver

Dan Delabruere reported:

- Vermont now has an Operation Lifesaver Program. Nancy Varney has retired and Alan Franklin is the new state coordinator who will handle daily operations of the state program.
- Operation Lifesaver is to prevent collisions and fatalities. The program began in Idaho in 1972. The national organization was established in 1986.
- Membership on the Operation Lifesaver Board includes representatives from the railroads in Vermont, Vermont State Police, Amtrak Police, VTrans, and citizens at large (Dave Allaire and Herb Russell). FRA is a non-voting member on the board. All board members are tasked with suggesting individuals who can reach out to the public and do education work.
- March 8, 2016 is the meeting to finalize the agreement with Operation Lifesaver and VTrans.
- The budget for Operation Lifesaver is \$30,000 (\$24,000 federal funds, \$6,000 state match). It is hoped to have \$30,000 in the Governor's Budget next year for Operation Lifesaver to provide education and help prevent collisions on all railroads in Vermont.

Charles Hunter, Genesee & Wyoming Railroad, stated his railroad is the leader in safety in the industry and is pleased to be involved in Vermont's Operation Lifesaver program. Vermont Railway and G&W are both contributing to the program.

6. Passenger Topics

Amtrak Ridership & Revenue

Bob Atchinson reported ridership is down for all trains, especially the Vermonter. Fuel costs are down and more people may be choosing to drive rather than take the train. Business Class on the Ethan Allen Express is doing very well. Marketing business class seats on the Vermonter should be explored. On Time Performance for the Ethan Allen Express is below the standard of last year. The Vermonter is performing well (up 12% last month and up 13% for the year). On time performance drives ridership.

Carl Fowler asked if cost containment measures by Amtrak nationally are impacting state supported service routes. Bill Hollister said there is no impact at this time due to the state contract. Cost cutting measures are being done internally at Amtrak (less staff travel, reduced business expenses). There has been a savings in fuel, but ridership has also decreased. Amtrak needs to build ridership and cut expenses. Carl Fowler asked if there are any ancillary benefits to Vermont by the reauthorization for Amtrak and out of pocket revenues applying to the northeast corridor. Bill Hollister said there are improved speeds and scheduling which have a domino effect. Mr. Fowler commented if Amtrak views itself as a network then connections that do not exist need to be addressed; state trains should be looked at from a national perspective. Bill Hollister confirmed Amtrak is trying to have a "network train" focus.

Station Stops

Dan Delabruere reported four stops on the western corridor were identified in the TIGER 7 grant (Burlington, Vergennes, Middlebury, Rutland). With these stops run time is one

hour and 44 minutes. Shelburne and Brandon have asked for stops. Platforms are needed at these two places. Chris Cole mentioned there are competing interests of promoting inter-city rail service and ridership so taxpayers pay less for Amtrak service versus increasing rail speed.

There was discussion of having stops in Shelburne (6 miles from Burlington) and Brandon (16 miles from Middlebury) and impact on run time. The following was mentioned:

- Kevin Chittenden said Amtrak needs to model the stops to determine the impact on run time. Five minutes per stop is the minimum.
- Chris Parker stated train stops make most sense in places to serve people who have to drive or to serve a densely populated area, like Burlington. The land use at the station in Shelburne needs discussion.
- Charlie Baker said CCRPC can do an analysis to see if the station in Shelburne will generate the ridership. People may find it easier to get to the station in Shelburne than the station in Burlington though the two stations may work in tandem.
- Christopher Natale stated stations located near to each other tend to cannibalize each other. Also, stations slow the trip and do not necessarily add riders. Amtrak wants to target the largest markets first. The service model of five roundtrips per day is modelled differently than two roundtrips per day. Major population centers are targeted and train speed is competitive. Generally, people will drive to the nearest station when taking the train. Stations should be spaced farther apart in order to keep up the speed of service for maximum efficiency
- Carl Fowler suggested seeing who else can be served by the station and the availability of parking that is not costly when determining where the train should stop. Vergennes has a park-and-ride facility and the population to support the stop. Brandon has an inn and tourism. The station in Brandon is a bit out of the way. A study should be done.
- Bill Hollister said speed (time competitive) and frequency are the two most important elements to be competitive and build ridership. To be competitive the train in Vermont needs speed of 60 mph and must beat travel by car. Stops even at five minutes have to be factored in. Freight trains on the line also have to be factored in. Amtrak's biggest city pairs are Burlington to New York and Montreal to New York. Trip time must be competitive. Once in Metro North territory there are commuter trains and if a time slot is missed the train is late by 20 minutes or more. Station stops should be kept to a minimum to stay competitive. Every minute counts. Vergennes is a great station with a park-and-ride to serve the region, but having other stops in proximity will impact competitiveness. Also, there is crew time to consider with trains, not just travel time.
- Costa Pappis said time competitiveness is the big driver for ridership. Buses and airlines connect major port to major port.
- Chris Andreasson echoed keeping stops to a minimum and that parking is a significant issue. If parking is available at a site then a stop could be considered. Bus service from Brandon to Middlebury to the train could be considered.

Burlington and Middlebury were significant points for Vermont Transit bus service. Chris Cole mentioned the state is looking at bus service to help connect people to rail stations.

- Chris Cole noted Brandon asked about being a flag stop if there are passengers. Christopher Natale said Amtrak has a few flag stops in Pennsylvania and the train must slow down. Flag stops work in limited circumstances and the time for the stop must be built into the schedule.
- Dave Allaire confirmed Brandon is trying to have a train stop and wanted the Rail Council to give this consideration, but the service would be start up and would have to be competitive and on time.
- Charles Hunter said the service should begin with the basic station stops and then after these are operating determine if other stops are justified.

MOTION by Carl Fowler, SECOND by Chris Andreasson, that the Rail Council agrees the TIGER 7 grant should include train stops at the station in Burlington, Vergennes, Middlebury, and Rutland.

DISCUSSION: Charlie Baker said CCRPC can do some analysis on the Shelburne station. Dave Allaire said an explanation of why the train is not stopping in their town at this time should be given to Shelburne and Brandon. Discussion can continue though. Chris Parker asked about saying “Vergennes or Shelburne” in the grant application. Chris Cole clarified the motion on the table speaks to the four stations. In addition, the state must provide the greatest return on investment and that means generating the greatest amount of ridership. Staff wanted advice from the Rail Council for the grant application and the stops listed. Trini Brassard pointed out the language in the grant application says “potential stops” because an analysis has not yet been done. If there is a conflict with crew time with the Vergennes station, for example, than another choice can be made. Dan Delabruere said the grant funding will be divided across the number of platforms on the route. Carl Fowler spoke in support of a stop in Vergennes due to the available parking and the population in the city as well as the surrounding areas that would use the station. Bill Hollister said the state will tell Amtrak what works based on the demographics. Keep in mind Amtrak has one frequency making stops on the New York side of the lake and competes with a major highway (interstate) there. There were no further comments.

VOTING: all ayes except two nays (Charlie Baker, Dave Allaire); motion carried.

Charlie Baker and Dave Allaire said they could not vote in support of the stops without analysis and further information.

VTrans will send a communication about the station stops to Brandon and Shelburne.

7. Other Business

Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Rail Council will be in May 2016. A Doodle poll will be done to determine the date.

8. Adjournment

With no further business and without objection the meeting was adjourned at 2:32 PM.

RScty: M.E.Riordan