

**VERMONT RAIL COUNCIL
MINUTES OF MEETING
NATIONAL LIFE BUILDING
DAVIS 5th FLOOR CONFERENCE ROOM 1
MONTPELIER, VERMONT
May 25, 2016**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chris Cole (Chair)
Carl Fowler Dave Wulfson
Jeff Munger Chris Andreasson
Rick Moulton Charles Hunter
Charlie Baker Herb Russell
Art Whitman

OTHERS PRESENT: Dan Delabruere, VTrans
Bob Atchinson, VTrans
Michele Boomhower, VTrans
Costa Pappis, VTrans
Larry Donna, VTrans
Paul Libby, VTrans
Erik Filkorn, VTrans
Alan Franklin, VTrans
Erin Charbonneau, VTrans
Karen Songhurst, VTrans
Scott Bascom, VTrans
Brian Searles, VTrans consultant
Bill Hollister, Amtrak
Kevin Chittenden, Amtrak
MaryAnne Michaels, VRS
Deb Carbin, Northeast by Rail
Haley Pero, Sen. Sander's Office
John Wilson, Jacobs
Raymond Tylicki, Northwestern University
Joe Colangelo, Town of Shelburne
David Atherton, Town of Brandon

[Note: Minutes reflect the order of the published agenda.]

1. Call to Order & Introductions

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

2. Public Comments

Deb Carbin, proprietor of a rail consulting firm and publisher of *Northeast by Rail* magazine, spoke of the difficulty train passengers have in getting transportation from train stations and the condition of stations. Ms. Carbin said services help cover the gaps. Her magazine publishes Amtrak information and information about services nearby to the

train stops. Signs are needed on the interstates indicating there are rail stops. Staying connected with downtown development offices and tourism offices is necessary. There was mention of distributing *Northeast by Rail* magazine on Amtrak trains in New York as well as the *Vermont*.

Ray Tylicki, Northwestern University, suggested there is need in Vermont for a container distribution port. UVM Transportation Center could do a freight study. There is federal money available for the study. There is public money going into rail infrastructure so public benefit should be maximized.

3. Approval of Minutes

February 17, 2016

MOTION by Carl Fowler, SECOND by Herb Russell, to approve the 2/17/16 minutes as written. VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.

4. New Grant Application

Dan Delabruere reported on the grant application to upgrade bridges to 286,000 capacity on track from Rutland to Bennington (23 bridges). Three of the bridges on the line are in New York. The \$18 million grant is a 60/40 split with federal money at \$10.9 million and state money at \$7.3 million. Per the state rail plan this is a priority line (Green Mountain rail line). The state should hear by October if the grant is received and has four years to do the work.

5. Operation Lifesaver

Alan Franklin reported on progress with the state's Operation Lifesaver program. There are four new qualified volunteers with four more nearly ready to go. Operation Lifesaver presentations are being done at high schools, driver education programs, state fairs, train shows, and other venues across the state. The focus needs to be on the general public, not just railroad people.

6. Economic Development

New Opportunities

The following was noted:

- The goal is to provide transportation so the economy can function.
- Cost of energy will have an impact. Savings from an established rail network will be significant if the cost of energy increases.
- If there are the facilities then frequency of service can increase.
- It is good for the state's economic resiliency to have a variety of transportation modes.
- Rail trails are increasing so there should be bike cars on Amtrak.
- Economic development for rail on the freight side depends on the proximity of businesses to the track.
- Vermont Rail Advocacy Network did a study that mapped five acre or larger parcels at grade and without environmental issues that could be developed for rail businesses, shippers, or a transfer facility. The next step is to provide a tax incentive or economic incentive to locate a rail user on a parcel.

- VRAN should be invited to the next transportation planning initiative (TPI) meeting.
- The public needs to be educated on today's rail industry.
- Consider how ag and forestlands are handled and borrow from this for rail.
- Get ahead of public relations issues and post stats on the VTrans website showing how pressure is taken off the highways by use of rail.

Western Corridor Earmark Funds

Chris Cole reported the reauthorization bill allows for the spending of the remaining amount in the earmark if it is less than 10% of the total earmark amount or if the project is not started then 10% of the earmark can be used on eligible federal highway projects. The earmark for the western corridor was \$30 million so there is \$3 million in apportionment. Language is being drafted to provide additional flexibility and more funding. Dan Delabruere will begin programming upgrades to the corridor.

7. Passenger Topics

Vermont (Montreal) Update

Brian Searles reported on the progress to re-establish the Vermont service to Montreal. Enabling legislation for preclearance is needed on both sides as a follow on to the 2015 treaty between the United States and Canada called "Beyond the Border". There is \$700 billion worth of commerce between Canada and the United States, and 300,000 people cross the Vermont border daily. Preclearance is important to border security. There will be a facility at Central Station and other places where one-on-one contact and screening can occur. Canadian Parliament is expected to table (introduce) a bill in June. There is no opposition. The Ministry of Transportation is taking on the project responsibilities for what has to happen at Central Station. In the United States, the March 10th meeting with Prime Minister Trudeau and the U.S. President highlighted three projects, one of which was Central Station in Montreal for rail. Customs and Border Protection has been supportive of the project. Senator Leahy is the lead sponsor of the bill to support preclearance legislation. The Senate is trying to attach the legislation to a "likely to pass" bill, such as S.2612 or HR.4657 (National Defense Authorization Act). There is support on the House side as well. Lots of work has been done to educate legislators on the bill. It is likely the Canadian legislature will pass their bill in 2016. Pressure will be kept on the U.S. legislators to pass the needed legislation in the U.S.

Carl Fowler asked about the preclearance in Vancouver, BC, and budgeting for the facility and track in Canada. Brian Searles said there is a stop for a secondary inspection with Vancouver that is eliminated on the Montreal preclearance. Discussion is ongoing as to who pays for the infrastructure, construction of the station, and additional operations. The partners are working together. Chris Cole added the meeting in Montreal was very productive. Customs and Border Protection and the Director and Assistant Director of Global Preclearance were all present. Lots of questions were asked and the facility was toured. There were no show stoppers. Funding discussion continues.

Ray Tylicki asked about inspection of freight trains through Port Huron. Charles Hunter explained every container has an identifier for a broker who is at Customs and handles

the preclearance. The shipping manifest is checked and cars go through a scanning device.

Amtrak Advertising

Erik Filkorn reviewed television and online advertising for Amtrak highlighting family, students, and businesses. The ads are being shown on television, smartphones, and computers. Print advertising includes *Vermont Life*, *Vermont Vacation*, *New York by Rail*. Vermont Tourism has been cranking up social media with Amtrak activities. Next go around will highlight ski areas. The relationship continues with collateral materials and Escapemaker.com on travel packages that promote rail. Escapemaker is representing Vermont in New York City at events.

Dan Delabruere said Vermont pays 69% of the advertising on the Vermonter route (Massachusetts and Connecticut share the remaining cost). Cost sharing is done on the Ethan Allen Express. There is a separate line item in the VTrans rail budget for specific Vermont dollars and the Rail Section is working with Tourism to avoid duplicating ads.

Carl Fowler commented the business class service on Amtrak should be mentioned in the business advertisement, and there is value in building relationships with hospitality outlets and ski areas.

Amtrak Ridership & Revenue

Alan Franklin reported ridership and revenue are down on both the Vermonter and the Ethan Allen Express in FY16. FY2015 was a record year for revenue and ridership on the Vermonter and for revenue on the Ethan Allen Express. From 2011 to 2015 ridership on the Vermonter increased 32% and 6% on the Ethan Allen Express.

Carl Fowler noted both routes were totally temporarily shut down on two occasions which has an impact on ridership. The low price of gas also has an impact on ridership. Bill Hollister said Amtrak has a marketing person to increase ridership on lines that were closed for infrastructure projects. Offering discounts can dilute revenues so a balance has to be found. Chris Cole noted performance and reliability affect ridership. The Vermonter has not shown any increase in performance. Performance must improve in order to have steady ridership.

There was mention of increasing the number of business class seats which show strong demand. Requests for business class are being tracked. Amtrak will be asked if it is possible to hold open a certain percentage of business class seats for the Vermonter to a certain date.

Slow Orders Through Vermont

Dan Delabruere reported the southbound train out of Vermont (St. Albans to Brattleboro station) is an average of 16 minutes late. The northbound train is an average of 10 minutes late.

Charles Hunter said five slow orders were removed as of May 13th for work on grade crossings and culvert replacements. Rock slow orders tied to NTSB are being addressed as best can be done.

Dave Wulfson mentioned work being done in New York on a double track main north of Renssler and work on the western corridor to get Amtrak to Burlington. There will be 59 mph continuous welded rail except for six miles of jointed rail on the CLP.

There was further discussion of on-time performance and possibly having flag stops at stations with low passenger numbers. Chris Cole suggested the following:

- Have Stephen Smith produce a map of the Ethan Allen Express and Vermonter routes with slow orders on lines and jurisdiction.
- Look at ridership, station by station, to develop a policy recommendation for flag stops.
- Have Alan Franklin engage with Amtrak on plans for eliminating slow orders.
- Have the railroads and Amtrak work cooperatively on improving on-time performance.

Station Stops on Ethan Allen Express Western Corridor Extension

Staff reported a TIGER grant was submitted for the \$26 million project (\$10 million federal, \$16 million state and local) to extend the Ethan Allen Express from Rutland to Burlington. Once the grant is received the state has four years to complete the work.

Joe Colangelo, Shelburne Town Manager, requested the Rail Council sanction further study by Regional Planning of a station stop in Shelburne which is a world class tourism destination with the Shelburne Museum, Shelburne Farms, and Teddy Bear Factory.

David Atherton, Brandon Town Manager, requested a flag stop only in Brandon which is the last town north of Rutland City and offers tourist attractions such as bike tours, inns, and lakes. The town is willing to discuss helping with the cost for the stop.

Charlie Baker, Regional Planning, said an amendment to contract may be needed to study the stop in Shelburne. Regional Planning is still open to doing the study. Costa Pappis said it will take six month to a year to work with Amtrak on station stops to optimize ridership. The grant request was for \$12 million, but \$10 million was allocated so the amount is already reduced by \$2 million. All new stations must have platforms which could increase costs. Work on stops should start now. Dan Delabruere noted flag stops have the same ADA requirements as regular station stops.

Carl Fowler suggested station stops should be reasonably spaced to allow the train to get up to speed and make up time. When there is multiple frequency and the likelihood to generate local ridership then that will justify more stops or stops at stations with low passenger numbers. A stop in Shelburne would not coordinate with the museum hours so the stop must be justified in other ways.

Dave Wulfson said a study of a train stop in Shelburne should include looking at the effect on traffic on Harbor Road.

Bill Hollister said notification was received from Amtrak's Vice President of Operations that the FRA was informed Amtrak intends to eliminate flag stops or incorporate the stops as regular stops. The driver is the ADA requirements. All stations must be ADA compliant by 2018. Amtrak service in Vermont is state supported so Amtrak will work with Vermont to try to meet the needs of the state. Presently, there are no flag stops in New York, Vermont, or Massachusetts.

Bikes on Amtrak Trains

As of April 29th bikes can be taken on the Vermonter. There are three racks on the trains north and southbound. A fourth rack will be added. Press coverage has been good. There are already over 50 reservations for bike rack spaces. Cost is \$10 per space. The pilot program will run through summer of 2017. Bill Hollister said there are 111 reservations on the Vermonter from Washington, DC to St. Albans up to September of which 80 are from Springfield to Vermont.

The Rail Council will discuss bike racks on the Ethan Allen Express after data from the pilot project are analyzed to determine demand.

Café Car Service

There was discussion of selling more Vermont products on the Vermonter to justify Vermont's portion of the commissary cost (\$93,000 of the annual \$136,000 cost). Chris Cole said Vermont may be better served by removing the tables and using the space for bikes. Food items could still be sold, but passengers would take the food to their seats. The focus should be on increasing ridership and decreasing the subsidy. Carl Fowler said Amtrak is under pressure to eliminate food service, but will lose ridership if food service is not provided. Food service could be contracted to local vendors offering local foods. Herb Russell suggested doing a pilot project on selling foods from farm stands and farmers markets.

Bill Hollister will find out if the current contract with Vermont allows using local vendors for food service. The Rail Council will further discuss café car service at the next meeting.

8. Freight and Construction Topics

Bridge Load Ratings

Erin Charbonneau reported on bridge work to date. There are 22 bridges on the Connecticut River line that are not yet rated. All bridges must be rated by 2017. Dan Delabruere noted on the southern portion of the western corridor 90 out of 178 bridges rate 286,000 capacity or greater and 45 bridges are below 286,000 capacity.

TIGER 7 Update

Paul Libby reported the TIGER 7 Cooperative Agreement was signed by the FRA to advance the project and start the clock for four year completion.

Rail Construction Projects Update FY2015/2016

Paul Libby reported 23 projects are completed including three FEMA projects and three crossing maintenance projects, 24 projects are in active construction including three FEMA projects and 13 crossing projects, 25 are in design and 22 are programmed. Bridge 219 is in active construction.

Chris Cole recognized Dan Delabruere and the rail team for the work to identify the condition of assets, programming, project management, and construction. Herb Russell assured the progress made in rail has not gone unnoticed in the statehouse. There has been lots of support garnered.

9. Other Business

Next Meeting

August 17, 2016

10. Adjournment

With no further business and without objection the meeting was adjourned at 4:02 PM.

RScy: M.E.Riordan