

**Vermont State Rail Plan
Public Information Meeting Summary
Essex Junction, VT
July 13, 2015
6:30 p.m.**

Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) Rail Program Manager Dan Delabreure welcomed attendees. He said that rail affects everyone in the state though many people are not aware of what gets transported on rail. For example, materials, such as salt that is used on the roadways, are delivered by rail. Without the rail system, another 500-600 trucks would be on Vermont roads daily.

Costa Pappis, VTrans Project Manager for the State Rail Plan outlined the agenda for the meeting. He said that he would give a presentation that would explain the purpose of the draft plan, describe the state's freight and passenger rail system, identify rail issues and opportunities, and outline a proposed capital plan and performance measures that would be used to evaluate if the plan's goals are achieved.

The State Rail Plan's purpose is to provide a framework for future rail investments. It was developed to meet all state and federal requirements for rail planning, including the Passenger Rail Investment & Improvement Act (PRIIA).

The state of Vermont began purchased rail lines threatened with abandonment in the 1960's and now owns 305 miles, slightly over 50 percent, of active rail in the State. At the time of purchase, rail was an important economic necessity as it was a major shipping mode for agricultural and resource-extraction industries. These industries were and continue to be major employers within the state.

Some 6.7 million tons of freight is carried in Vermont annually, with almost 70 percent being through-movements. The majority of rail freight (pulp and paper, clay, concrete, stone, lumber or wood products, fuels, and chemicals) are destined for all regions of the country. In recent years, freight shipments have declined but rail still has a major economic impact for its shippers. For example, the railroad operating along Vermont's state owned rail system employs 130 people and serves industries that provide 3,700 jobs.

Vermont passenger rail ridership has risen significantly in recent years, averaging a seven percent annual increase which exceeds the national average two-three percent. Two services are offered – the Vermonter and Ethan Allen Express, with a combined Vermont ridership of 101,126 in federal fiscal year 2013 (ends September 30). The State Plan proposes additional services aimed towards meeting the 400,000 annual ridership goal of the State Energy Plan by 2035.

Costa Pappis identified several issues facing the state-owned rail lines. Underinvestment during the first 30 years after they were purchased in the 1960s has resulted in conditions that threaten both passenger and freight rail. Bridges and track need significant upgrades yet, unlike aviation, highway and transit, there is no dedicated federal funding for rail. At the same time, changes in passenger rail funding by the federal government have turned over full responsibility for funding Vermont's passenger rail system to the state. In recent years Vermont's annual passenger rail operating costs have increased from \$4.5 million to over \$8 million.

Taking into account the rail system's needs, resources and opportunities, the following goals were articulated in the State Rail Plan:

- Maintain the State's rail system in a state of good repair
- Expand the rail system's capacity to accommodate growth objectives
- Expand the rail system's use
- Provide a rail system that is financially sustainable
- Improve intermodal connectivity
- Improve the rail system to support economic development
- Enhance the safety of the rail system

Priorities for intercity passenger rail are:

- Extend the Ethan Allen express to Burlington
- Extend the Vermonter to Montreal
- Create a new Western Corridor service through Bennington
- Provide additional frequency along the Vermonter

Priorities for freight rail are:

- Upgrade weight capacity to accommodate 286,000 pound railcars, beginning on the Western Corridor
- Bring bridge superstructures to 280K capacity
- Improve track capacity to 115K weight
- Support rail yard track improvements and industrial access projects
- Enhance safety at grade crossings

The capital plan of the State Rail Plan focuses on three main areas: 1) maintaining operations of state rail lines, 2) supporting economic development projects to encourage job growth and 3) addressing intercity passenger rail priorities. Total costs of the capital plan, including bringing current and proposed passenger rail lines to FRA Track Class 4 (79 mph) status would be \$665.6 million.

Costa Pappis encouraged attendees to read the full Draft Rail Plan as it is posted on the Agency's website. VTrans will be taking comments through July 31, 2015. Once the comment period ends, the draft plan will be modified and finalized.

Comments and questions raised during the meeting are noted in italics below followed by Dan Delabruere and Costa Pappis response.

Western Corridor rail improvements

It seems like you get a lot of bang for the buck to improve the tracks between Essex Junction and Burlington. If New England Central Railroad contributed 20%, can the State come up with the rest of the money?

Improving these tracks is a 286K carload priority due to interchange traffic with the NECR. The tunnel is a big issue in making this link. Though it is short, the larger freight cars have trouble getting through, and there is a curve. In the past, we have included this line for track upgrades in federal grant applications but have not been successful. The tunnel will continue to be a problem for both freight and passenger rail.

How will passenger rail between Bennington and Burlington affect freight?

We think upgrading the rail for passenger service will improve conditions for freight. There is plenty of capacity and schedules could be coordinated to accommodate both.

Does the plan have anything about a commuter line?

No, the plan does not include commuter services but VTTrans has is responding to a legislative mandate to study the feasibility of establishing a commuter line between St. Albans and Montpelier via Burlington and Essex Junction.

Our transit association is interested in establishing commuter rail between Burlington and Montpelier.

Would Vermont be more competitive for rail funds if there were more commuting activity?

There are different funding sources for rail programs. Federal funding for intercity passenger rail comes from the Federal Railroad Administration, while federal funding for commuter rail is from the Federal Transit Administration. Commuter rail funding is not automatic, it must be demonstrated that there is sufficient ridership in order to justify the capital expense. In addition, operating funds are limited to federal public transit funds or state funding.

On the Western Corridor, are track conditions appropriate for service from Rutland to Burlington?

Incremental improvements have been ongoing along this stretch of track. We have a federal grant pending that would ready the corridor for intercity passenger rail. Construction would take approximately 3 – 3.5 years to complete.

If you start service between Burlington and Rutland, won't it reduce ridership of the Vermonter?

Yes, some ridership heading to New York would shift from the Vermonter to the Ethan Allen Express, but this will dependent on the schedule.

Safety

It is critical to safety that we change the laws at grade crossings. Right now a driver can come to a crossing, stop, and can legally go across the tracks.

State and federal legislators would have to introduce any change in existing laws.

I rode the train from Essex Junction to Hartford, CT and the conductor told me that we went through over 200 crossings.

That is possible. There are over 400 at grade crossings in the state.

Some NECR conductors are afraid to go through railroad crossings at 79 mph.

Connection to Montreal

The year 2035 noted in your capital plan is too long to wait for passenger rail service to Montreal.

Passenger rail service to Montreal is a top priority in the plan and is set to begin within the first five year period. There are no funds in the capital plan because no physical improvements are needed. The track in Vermont is ready. The issue with establishing this service is border clearance. The two federal agencies representing the US and Canada have to agree on operating procedures.

I was told that there was a customs area already set up in Montreal Central Station. Now it sounds like it isn't.

An area is planned for the station but there are cost-sharing agreements that would have to be set up among Amtrak, Vermont and New York.

Other

Where are the yard improvements that are recommended in the plan?

The proposed improvements are scattered at rail yards at multiple locations in the state. These primarily involve rehabilitation of existing infrastructure.

You're looking at two railroads adding two businesses each year. Most of the rail today is bulk. I don't see how you are going to generate that level of interest in rail.

Freight rail shipping is constantly in flux and the market keeps changing. We are now seeing more fuels, heavy machinery, and other products that use to be almost exclusively transported by trucks slowly shifting to rail. There are also businesses in Vermont that are expanding. For example, propane and large feed dealers are expanding. Our short line railroads are actively recruiting to generate business.

Does the State have any input into the schedule for the Vermonter? It arrives at connecting stations after trains have left.

We are looking into developing a better schedule so the Vermonter will connect with other trains. It does not make sense for us to reschedule our train until the projects in Massachusetts and Connecticut are completed.