

**Vermont State Rail Plan  
Public Information Meeting Summary  
Rutland, VT  
March 24, 2014  
6:30-8:00 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 consists of products derived from stone (clay, concrete, glass and stone).

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 the 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.

#### **Rail trends and developments**

***Ten years ago a new track was opened in Prince Rupert to address West Coast rail congestion issues. I don't think we've seen any increase in volume in Vermont from this port.***

That is correct. NECR hasn't seen much freight from this source. The congestion issues along West Coast ports seem to no longer be an issue.

***Are you factoring in growth in post-Panamax ships calling at North Atlantic ports into increased shipments through New England? This will increase the length of trains.***

Improvements to accommodate very large container ships at the Port of New York and New Jersey will likely divert traffic away from Halifax and Montreal, but the rail traffic generated will show up in New York, not Vermont.

***Does the recent Supreme Court ruling affect rail preservation?***

We believe it was a very narrow ruling and will have little impact.

***Although PRIIA Section 209 was done with the best of intentions, the result may not have been good as it seems like a cost shift.***

Although the intent of PRIIA was to standardize Amtrak costs across the system, all states with short-haul routes have seen increased costs, and they have not been offset by increased revenue. There is very little money available for intercity rail whereas commuter rail has substantial federal investment through the federal transit program. PRIIA does offer opportunities to states to be more creative in managing intercity rail

services. States do not have to rely on Amtrak and have more flexibility about equipment and schedules.

Rail is the only transportation mode that does not have a dedicated federal funding stream. In contrast, highway and transit projects receive approximately 80% federal support; and airports improvements are often funded at the 90% from the federal government.

***In planning for passenger rail, intermodal connections with buses are needed for trains to be successful.***

Twenty years ago Vermont had some 40-50 intercity bus stops within the state and today it has only five stations, mostly along I-89. Intermediate stops, which used to have a schedule with 4-6 buses a day, no longer have any service.

### **Rail on the Western Corridor**

***If rail service was established along the Western Corridor, track would be improved and this would help freight, an important factor as freight is needed to support passenger rail. Both services would benefit.***

***Would the federal government support commuter rail between Rutland and Burlington?***

FTA would have to assess where the route had the population base that would warrant this service. It would also factor in whether there was available bus service on the route.

***The rail yards in New England have a limited ability to handle traffic. Their capacity needs to be addressed. There is no place to take the trains apart. Will there be any discussion of this in the State Rail Plan? Here in Rutland the relocation of the rail yard seems to be on hold. It's in Vermont's interest to have viable rail yards.***

Most rail yards are located in urban areas. While the rail yards haven't changed, the land use around them has. Rail yards face three challenges:

1. Operational issues for the railroad
2. Adjacent land uses and compatibility
3. Clean up and remediation costs for abandoned rail sites.

***The team developing the State Rail Plan should read a book published in the 1920's, "The People Will Be Served." It recommends thinking about where people begin and end their journey. In 1944, 50% of Americans had access to intercity trains. Today only 2% have access. Recently we calculated that it would take two days to get from Bennington to Burlington by bus.***

***There is so much focus on intercity marketing and not enough on letting people know what they can do once they arrive in Vermont.***

## Plan Goals

***What do you do with rail that is obsolete? The plan should address this.***

***There is serious need for international cooperation to get trains into Montreal. It's important because there is a huge population to our north and restored train service will be good for our local economy.***

Work is underway on developing a pre-clearance facility in Montreal rather than having clearance of customs done at the border. It will require an international treaty for that to happen, along with other physical and operational improvements.

***The plan should have as a top priority bringing up the system to carry 286 weight rail cars, up from 263. A secondary priority would be rebuilding bridges to enable double-stacks. Without these upgrades, Vermont rail's ability to be competitive is limited.***

## Needs and Opportunities

***The infrastructure of the Green Mountain Railroad needs upgrading, especially because hazardous material is shipped over that line.***

***The state should pursue the opportunity to establish train service between Rutland-Bennington-New York.***

Vermont and New York recently developed a bi-state intercity passenger rail study which lays out a route to link North Bennington and Manchester with Albany, NY.

***There is an opportunity to carry waste granite on the WACR line to seacoast ports, opening up a potential market as granite is resistant to salt erosion.***

One major focus of the plan will be to increase Vermont-generated freight as it is considered important for freight railroads to remain viable, and support the state's economic development.

***The Middlebury spur is designed to take truck traffic off of Route 7.***

***The MMA line should be preserved as it's an important connection between Canada and the Connecticut River rail line.***

The President of the Rutland Chamber of Commerce announced that Rutland has been selected as a site for two events due to its prominent role in rail. On May 10 the Rutland train station will be one of only 17 stations nationwide that will feature celebrations as part of National Train Day. In June 2015 Rutland will host the annual convention of the National Rail Society.

The meeting adjourned at 8 p.m.