

**Vermont State Rail Plan
Public Information Meeting Summary
White River Junction, VT
July 15, 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 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) address intercity passenger rail priorities. The 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 until 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.

Industrial rail development

I have a concern about how the expansion of rail that is a goal of the plan is balanced with a community's goal of revitalization of its downtown. The state is spending money to enhance downtowns, but increasing rail activity may not be compatible with this goal.

We don't view these as incompatible goals. Freight provides the underlying maintenance of rail lines used for passenger rail. Without a freight operator, it is highly unlikely that we would be able to maintain these lines for passenger service. Freight rail also transports the products manufactured, extracted, or stored in local economies.

Sometimes meeting with the town is the last stop, an after-thought. We'd like you to consider what you put into railroad sidings. For example, please keep in mind that a business that generates a lot of truck traffic will have a negative impact on our town and would be less desirable than another with less traffic.

The state does not control the business decisions of railroads.

There is a law which states that railroad activities are regulated by federal law which preempts state and local laws and ordinances. For example in Bellows Falls the town had no leverage on permitting salt sheds to be placed there. The Surface Transportation Board has the authority to control businesses next to the rail line.

I hope the State will consider the quality of economic development and would encourage small, more environmentally-benign businesses and tourism that would be more sustainable in the long term.

Investment in both industrial development and downtowns is important.

Emergency planning for rail

I live in Pownal where we have the special problem of over 5,000 railcars loads with fuel coming through our town of 3,500 people, with three trailer parks right next to the rail line. If there were an emergency, the nearest foam truck would come from either Pittsfield or Rutland for mutual aid. We need more resources – tankers, hazmat suits and training to be prepared for an incident.

The state works with emergency responders and we do have a plan for all corners of the state and all railroads.

There seems to be a gap in your emergency planning for rail. Our fire chief should know ahead of time what when trains with hazardous materials are coming through the town so that he could feel more prepared. Hazardous materials travel through here all the time. We have an excellent fire department in White River Junction. There should be a better system in place to work with local departments.

We have to be realistic about using rail to transport fuels. In 40 years there have been two serious hazmat incidents. There were 18 factors that led to the Lac Megantic disaster. We need to put into perspective what it means to haul fuel by rail. 99.98% of hazardous material gets to its destination without incident. If rail was not used, trucks would be carrying fuel. When looking at all commodities that are transported by rail, that is over 500-600 more trucks on the road each day.

Yes, but what would be safer, an incident with 8,000 gallons of ethanol on a truck versus 6 million gallons on a train? Furthermore, rail lines pass through our downtowns, whereas our Interstate highways are physically separated.

Rail and tourism

I want to hear more about partnering with downtowns along rail lines and tourism interests for economic development rather than focusing on attracting companies that would use rail. A recommendation of the plan is to establish a Working Group to encourage economic development.

How will this group work? Where will it meet? Who will be involved? Can communities participate?

First the Working Group will need to be coordinated at the state level with agencies such as Natural Resources, Community and Economic Development and the Agency of Transportation.

Intermodal connections

What are the plans for intermodal [transit] connections? Most transit services stop at 5:30 or 6 p.m., before the train arrives at the station. And, we have only one taxi in White River Junction and that taxi may already be busy and not available for train passengers. When people get off the trains they often need transportation to get to their final destination.

At some stations, for example Essex Junction, planning is being undertaken to make it intermodal but at most stations there are not enough passengers to set up regular transit connections, according to local transit providers. We have talked with several transit providers and the point to the low ridership for scheduled service. The goal of these transit agencies is to maximize ridership. Applying scarce resources to provide service to train passengers means that the agency cannot serve markets with potentially larger numbers of passengers. [A representative of Advance Transit in attendance confirmed this. He said that Amtrak had approach his company to provide service but the number of train passengers needing bus service may be about five passengers whereas his company now provides about 900,000 rides a

year. The company gets more requests to align with intercity buses.] Also, it is difficult to align the timing bus and train schedules as the train is not always on time. [Another attendee from Castleton confirmed that this is a problem. The local transit agency extended transit service to serve the train station, but the train is often late.]

When you consider new services, please see what can be done to adjust the train schedule to transit schedules.

As part-time caretaker of the White River Junction train station Amtrak is doing a better job being on time but the schedules still do not allow passengers to make connections to other trains such as the Lake Shore Limited or the Silver Star.

In the most recent contract with Amtrak, the State set performance measures – incentives and disincentives – for on-time performance. We believe that has made a difference. We are aware of the difficulty of making connections and plan to “re-string” the train schedules once the improvement projects underway in Massachusetts and Connecticut are completed. It is difficult to change the scheduling of platforms at Penn Station so we only want to do that once.

Where there is transit service, can the bus company be alerted if the train is delayed?
Travel alerts are available if you book your ticket on line. We are slowly headed in this direction.

Expanding passenger rail

Why don't you think of commuter rail in Pownal? You have the track, and the railroad has expressed interest in service between Schenectady and Pownal. Also, there should be a train from Pownal to North Adams, Greenfield and Boston. There is federal money available to have this commuter route. Thirty-five million dollars would fund commuter rail and the Positive Train Control signals are already in place.

Commuter rail funding comes from the Federal Transit Administration and the states get a fixed amount of operating transit funds. We have to balance out the needs for transit in order to make adjustments to the way we spend our FTA funding. Also, \$35 million does not sound like sufficient to bring the western corridor rail line to a condition for commuter rail. The tracks are not signalized for commuter rail.

How many trains a day do we now have between White River Junction and Montpelier? What would it cost to double the trains? Would you re-coup the cost in fares? It is a common commuter destination.

We have one return trip daily in the form of the Vermonter Amtrak train. The Agency has been tasked by the legislature to address the potential for commuter rail in the state. The first route that we will study is between St. Albans and Montpelier via Burlington and Essex Junction.

We need to accept that we are undergoing a transportation revolution. More people are working on broadband and are working on trains during their commute. We should be considering what's best for Vermont

A complicating factor in developing a rail plan is that we do not know what will happen in the future. We do our best to predict trends.

Please convince me that putting service up the Western Corridor is worth the money. I think that we should invest in more Vermonter service. Also, I would be concerned about the conflict between freight and passenger rail in the Western Corridor.

We are interested in providing a good level of service for both corridors. The proposed improvements to the Western Corridor would include adequate sidings and capacity to schedule trains to avoid conflict.

Other questions and comments

I have experienced the European rail system and it is quite extraordinary. It doesn't seem to distinguish between commuter and intercity trains. You can get everywhere that you need to go by train and many do not need to own a car. Why can't we just increase train frequency?

Europeans rail systems do distinguish between commuter, regional, and intercity services. In Europe, there are more federal rail investments. Here in the U.S we just don't have that kind of support from the federal government. We are a state of slightly less than 630,000, and it would be hard to support rail at the same level as they do in Europe.

How secure is state funding?

The State has provided a stable source of funding for years. Federal investment has been more sporadic.

What is the time from to expand service to Montreal?

Vermont's tracks has been ready for a couple of years but we need to figure out how to allow pre-clearance, cost sharing between the states and Amtrak has to come to an agreement with Canadian rail. Right now there is service to Montreal on New York's Adirondack but it takes as long as two hours to clear the border.

What is the State's position about Pan Am expanding its business on the CT River/WACR line?

The State does not take a position on the Pan Am's access into Vermont.

Thank you for the better on-time performance at the Claremont station. Please note that the ridership numbers for this station in your plan is inaccurate. The plan indicates 297 passengers in 2013 whereas the correct number is 2,123.

We will correct this in the final plan.

Many of the train stations are dilapidated. Are station improvements a part of the plan?

We have a goal to rehabilitate rail stations in the plan but no specific projects identified. With one exception in White River Junction, the state does not own rail stations. We are interested in communities developing plans for their stations.

Is there a marketing plan included in the State Rail Plan?

No but the Agency has active communications with other state agencies who do marketing.

Part of increasing ridership is education. On our state highways we do not have any signs showing the location of a railroad station.

Can you explain why New England ridership is up on the Vermonter and Downeaster as compared to the rest of the country?

We believe the investments made in rail have improved services. The travel time is shorter and ride is smoother. Here the rail lines were already in place and just had to be fixed.

The State of Vermont needs to have more strict trespassing laws to keep people away from the tracks. Politicians seem to be more interested in votes than safety.