

**VERMONT RAIL COUNCIL
MINUTES OF MEETING
DILL BUILDING A
2178 AIRPORT ROAD
BARRE, VERMONT
December 16, 2021**

***Hybrid meeting held in-person and by teleconference**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Carl Fowler Charlie Moore
Joann Erenhouse Rick Moulton
Charlie Baker Art Whitman
Charles Hunter Jeff Munger

OTHERS PRESENT: Joe Flynn, Secretary of Transportation
Michele Boomhower, VTrans
Dan Delabruere, VTrans
Trini Brassard, VTrans
Costa Pappis, VTrans
Zoe Neaderland, VTrans
Eleni Churchill, VTrans
Toni Clithero, VTrans
Karen Songhurst, VTrans
Paul Libby, VTrans
Kyle Wells, VTrans
Erin Charbonneau, VTrans
Shaun Corbett, VTrans
Erica Mongeon, VTrans
Scott Burbank, VHB
Kevin Chittenden, Amtrak
Christopher Natale, Amtrak
Selden Houghton, VRS
Mary Anne Michaels, VRS
Christopher Parker, VRAN
Ben Heckscher
Richard "Hank" Lee
Bruce King
Deb Fox
Peter Young
Chris Saunders, Sen. Leahy's Office
Erhard Mahnke, Sen. Sanders' Office
Dan Currier
Lou
Bob
Jack Madden
Allison Crowley

Jane Brophy
Devon Neary
Dan Peacock
Dan Tillberg
Sasa Dekam
Alex DePillis
Henry Epp
Bill McDonald
Zane Luemslsky
M. Winslow, ACRPC

1.0 Call to Order & Introductions

Dan Delabruere called the teleconference meeting to order at 1 PM.

2.0 Approval of Minutes

June 24, 2021

MOTION by Rick Moulton, SECOND by Charlie Moore, to approve the minutes of 6/24/21 as presented.

DISCUSSION:

- **Carl Fowler mentioned raising the profile and priority of the Montreal extension on both the New York and Vermont sides by treating the extension as a joint venture.**

VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.

3.0 Passenger Topics

3.1 Ethan Allen to Burlington Update

Paul Libby reported work is full steam ahead to get ready for Amtrak service to Burlington. Platforms, sidings, reworking crossings for safety are some of the projects that are essential for the service to happen. The siding in Pittsford will store cars so VRS can do switching during Amtrak hours. Dan Delabruere noted materials are coming in and VTrans is in good shape, but still at the mercy of the suppliers

Carl Fowler asked about moving the New Haven Jct. station. Trini Brassard said the project is moving forward following a NEPA process. The station will be moved in February. Carl Fowler asked about surfacing. Dan Delabruere said this will happen in the spring.

3.2 Amtrak Ethan Allen Schedule Change

The Amtrak schedule that will be in place when the Burlington service starts was reviewed. It was noted the main line track exemption has been considered in the schedule. Bill McDonald opined the schedule is a disappointment, leaving too early for NYC and arriving too late. Also, the service duplicates service already in place. Dan Delabruere said they did look at the impact on ridership with the schedule and agreed some riders will be lost and some will be gained. Carl Fowler said it would be better to get people to NYC early afternoon rather than evening. The impact on ridership should be evaluated as well as what passengers want for service. There is other service that gets

people to NYC mid-day and these services need to be integrated and a timetable produced so people know the options. Seldon Houghton, VRS, stated many factors went into the schedule. VRS worked with VTrans on the exemption which was key. Dan Delabruere pointed out the schedule gains an east-west connection.

3.3 Ridership

Toni Clithero reported both the Vermonter and Ethan Allen Express are performing well overall. In FY20 ridership was down 20%, but the services were out for six months. October 2021 ridership compared to October 2019 for the Vermonter was down 13.4%, but the Ethan Allen Express was up 4%.

4.0 Freight and Construction Topics

4.1 VT State freight Plan Update

Zoe Neaderland reviewed seven initiatives noted in the plan including freight planning and policy, climate change and resiliency, technological innovation, trade corridors and economic development, highway operations, rail development, and air freight. The implementation plan includes key proponents and funding sources. The plan will be submitted to FHWA by 12/22/21 then finalized and implemented. Dan Delabruere noted the plans are critical for the state to receive grant funding from the FRA and FHWA.

Bill McDonald asked about freight trains moving merchandise or just bulk commodities. Zoe Neaderland said the draft rail plan has information in Tech Memo #3 on the matter. Fifteen percent of freight coming into the state is by rail. Seldon Houghton, VRS, added occasionally merchandise is handled, but heating products are key commodities coming into the state.

4.2 Project Updates

Paul Libby showed project photos of the Middlebury platform, Burlington platform, Amtrak siding, and Pittsford (Florence) siding, and gave a brief update on the BUILD grant program covering 29 bridges between Rutland to Hoosick, FEMA grants for repairs on the Connecticut line in Fairlee, Green Mountain line, and VTR Bennington and Rutland, crossings in Dorset (US7), Lyndon (East Burke Road), Rutland City (Allen Street), bridges outside the BUILD grant including B.562 (Coventry), B.538 (St. Johnsbury), B.522 (Newbury), B.513 (Bradford), and the Montpelier runaround track.

There was brief discussion of drones. Dan Delabruere said drones are being used to assist the project work. Joe Flynn added drones are being used for a myriad of needs, not just bridge inspections for rail and highway.

5.0 Operation Lifesaver

Toni Clithero reported work continues on spreading the rail safety message. The ad placed on Front Porch Forum about the return of Amtrak was far reaching. Next steps will include visiting schools and other places along the western corridor to spread the word about Amtrak's return.

Bill McDonald suggested the Vermont State Police be involved at the busier crossings like Vergennes and New Haven for a while. Dan Delabruere recalled there was a member of the Vermont State Police on the Operation Lifesaver board in the past and this should be done again.

6.0 Federal Infrastructure Bill

Costa Pappis gave an overview of what Vermont can expect relative to rail from the federal infrastructure bill. Vermont must meet congressional intent and FRA criteria for grant applications to receive funding. The bill has \$100 billion for transportation competitive grants of which \$40 billion is for rail. Some programs require a business plan and a private sector role, and others require Amtrak involving multiple partners and a nonfederal match up to 50%. The selection criteria for grants will focus on climate change, system resilience, equity.

Chris Saunders spoke about Amtrak replacing equipment and Congress providing 50% cost share for acquisition of new cars. Vermont's responsibility would have been \$3 million per year for the next 30 years, but Congress included money in the infrastructure package so states are not burdened. Vermont will effectively have about a \$90 million savings. Other bills will cover the Amtrak/bus station in Essex Junction. Rail projects must be tied to a state rail plan.

Carl Fowler asked if Vermont will have input on the Amtrak cars. Dan Delabruere said Vermont has been included in the specs and design review. Jack Madden added the cars will be Siemens SE-4 locomotives and venture cars. Bill McDonald expressed hope the existing Amtrak cars are retained to be used if extra trains are needed during peak hour periods, and that Amtrak will use dual mode locomotives.

Carl Fowler asked if grant proposals must be in within 180 days. Costa Pappis said grant notices will not be released until spring and then there will be three months to submit. Carl Fowler mentioned applying for money jointly with Canada. Karen Songhurst gave an update on the train extension to Montreal, noting dialogue is ongoing with the partners (Quebec, Vermont, New York, Amtrak). Massachusetts and Connecticut are also on board. The services are prime candidates for funding. A station in Canada will be developed with what is needed in the interior. There is an agreement on how the facility will be shared. How to share costs still needs to be determined. There is high level engagement in Quebec. The extension has been a priority for many administrations in Canada and the US.

Jack Madden mentioned according to CN the Rouses Point track will be downgraded to 10 mph which will impact the Adirondack.

It was announced Karen Songhurst is retiring from VTTrans at the end of December 2021 after a 25-year career that began with the Champlain Flyer passenger rail service. Well wishes were extended.

7.0 Public Input

Rick Moulton urged keeping the Burlington to Essex route in the mix when there is money available for this connection.

8.0 Next Meeting

March 24, 2022

9.0 Adjournment

MOTION by Art Whitman, SECOND by Rick Moulton, to adjourn the meeting.

VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:07 PM.

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