

MINUTES SUBJECT TO CORRECTION BY THE VERMONT RAIL COUNCIL. CHANGES, IF ANY, WILL BE RECORDED IN THE MINUTES OF THE NEXT MEETING OF THE COUNCIL.

**VERMONT RAIL COUNCIL
MINUTES OF MEETING
VIRTUALLY VIA TEAMS / ONLINE ONLY MEETING
September 21st, 2023**

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Carl Fowler	David Wulfson
Arthur (Art) Whitman	Andreasson, Chris
Charles Baker	Rick Moulton
Charlie Moore	
Rep. Sara Coffey	

ATTENDEES:

Aaron Guyette (VHB)	Delabruere, Daniel (VTrans)	Pelletier, Dave (VTrans)
Allison Crowley	Jake Twarog	Peter Young (VRS)
Bannerman, Percy (VTrans)	Kaplan, Isaac (VTrans)	ryan t
Ben Heckscher	Layton, Renee (VTrans)	Scott Burbank
Boomhower, Michele (VTrans)	Libby, Paul (VTrans)	Selden Houghton (VRS)
Brassard, Trini (VTrans)	Matt DeSorgher	Songhurst, Karen (VTrans)
Brophy, Jane (Amtrak)	Michael Arnold	Tillberg, David (VTrans)
Charbonneau, Erin (VTrans)	Natale, Christopher M (Amtrak)	Walker, Mark (VTrans)
charlene lovet	Nummy, John (VTrans)	Wells, Kyle (VTrans)
Clark, Margaret T (Amtrak)	Ostebo, Kurt (Amtrak)	Wilson, John (Manchester, NH)
Colin Larsen (Amtrak)	Pappis, Costa (VTrans)	
Dan Peacock		
Dejan, Sasa (VTrans)		

1) Call to Order & Introductions

Dan Delabruere called the meeting to order at 1:03 PM. He mentioned that room still not available due to use by Incident Command Center for operations. Tried to line up for in-person, but it didn't work out in time to line up for this meeting's announcement. Hope to have room back for next meeting in December. Introductions were done. We are recording meeting Dan said.

2) Approval of Previous Minutes

Previous Minutes from March 16th, 2023

MOTION by Charlie Baker, **SECOND** by Charlie Moore, **to approve the minutes of 3/16/23 as presented.**

Carl Fowler had a minor correction. He was present, not via Teams. Re-vote as amended. Seeing no objections, minutes approved. No votes from Rep Coffey. and Chris Andreasson. Both abstained from the vote because were not able to be present at the last meeting.

Dan, said for approval of minutes as corrected: raise hand if don't want to approve the minutes. With no hands raised, all approved. Moved into approved minutes.

3) Passenger Topics

3 a) Ridership report – Chris Natale, Amtrak

Chris Natale from Amtrak presented Ridership and On Time Performance (OTP) figures and charts for the Ethan Allen Express and Vermonter comparing FY23 with FY19. FY19 was a record-breaking year for ridership. We appear to be on track to meet or exceed it, but we don't have August or September numbers in FY23 yet.

Dan D. We try to pack a lot into our short construction season each year. When you do construction, rail has to be suspended for a time or slowed down. This is real and happens every year. It is not just in this state. The 'why' here not stated in the numbers report, but this is temporary and solvable problem. A lot of the slow orders, particularly on Vermonter side, a lot of these slow orders are expected to be removed very soon. Focusing particularly on Vermont, on Ethan Allen is a timetable issue that we are going to try to address. Our July numbers weren't great, they were okay but not great. A lot of that was the train was shut down due to the storm, and quite frankly Vermont, and we had to do some bussing.

Question Rep. Sara Coffey. On the Vermonter are we looking pretty good? Or is there a sense of how we are doing compared to FY 19.

Dan D. I'm happy with the numbers. With foliage season ahead believe we are doing well. FY 19 was a record year, and I think we may be on track to exceed that.

Dan D. - Thanks to Amtrak for pitching in. Interviewing now for Toni Clithero's position, who would normally present these figures, is in interviews, and we hope to have that close soon.

3 b) Ethan Allen Schedule – Dan D.

With enhancements from Burlington to Rutland made it so the trains can go faster. And this has caused issues with the schedule. We have been working with Amtrak to shorten the amount of time between point A and point B. Not as simple as just saying make the train leave 20-30 minutes later out of Burlington. Creates domino effect because track needs to be cleared before other trains can get onto the track. That effect happens all the way down. As Carl pointed out, we also have some conflicts right now we are working through in NY state. We are working through conflict with Adirondak right now. We mentioned this last Rail council and we are still working on it. We are working on Amtrak Ethan Allen schedule that is reduced in run time to New York City. A lot of times now the train will sit in Rutland because it has to wait before it gets to the next station due to scheduled arrival times. It's different every day, but around 20 min a day waiting to leave Rutland. That's what we're working on. There's many options and we're looking at all of them.

Q: Selden Houghton – Think you summed it up well. Certainly a ripple effect on freight train can have ripple effect that then affect inbound Amtrak train. The effects can also be seen later in the day. Think you covered it well and we've been talking as you said.

Dan – When we talk about Dominos it's not just southbound Ethan Allen. You need crew rest for the crew before they can leave on another route the next day. That's one of the dominos. It's complex. Not easy as "just leave 30 minutes later". It's not impossible, and we will figure this out.

Q: Carl Fowler – Have we made progress on getting the bus to stop in Burlington at Union Station?

Dan – Answer yes and no. Modified solution. Between bus company and timing of bus at the bus station up in town. Bus having conflict making the turn and getting to the bus station. Making enough time between train station and bus station. Is being worked on. Can't just stop bus there because no safe place and not enough space to make turn by the station currently.

Q: Carl Fowler – error in computer west of Chicago. If want Dallas to Burlington, there's no route. Only affected Eastbound. Is error in Amtrak database. Just try Dallas to Union in Burlington. In fact, it does connect. It's costing us business. Carl urged Amtrak to test and look into it themselves. Amtrak is getting new equipment in the West. Time for them to consider giving us an additional car on each train. The excuse that they don't have equipment doesn't hold water anymore.

Q: Jake Twarog. Just in terms of passenger utility. Any timeframe as for when people could go from Burlington to NYC at faster scheduler/ reduced time?

Dan D. – Depends on if a major shift. For example, if we negotiate with freight trains, how does that domino. We don't know when, but the goal is as soon as possible. Were sidetracked a little by the storm. As soon as possible.

Q: Jake Twarog – Train 290 approaches north section north of NY. Seems Adirondak heading northbound always prioritized even when it's heading significantly late.

Dan D. – Not going to comment on dispatching in NY, but everyone is aware and that is the problem we are trying to solve it.

Q Dave Wulfson – We have rail project on CLP starting soon, probably into the Spring. To Selden, might consider sharing some of the extra time / delay and spread that over the CLP because there will be some delay over there given the change.

Dan D. – Clearly one more domino to consider when draft schedule. It's a one-time season domino, but we have to consider it and figure out how to make that work. Thank you Dave for that and we'll talk with Selden when we consider that domino.

Q Carl Fowler – Are we doing off passenger quickly? Have we had any conversations on facility in Montreal. Try to alleviate 10 MPH speed restrictions in NY?

Dan D. – Yes, we're involved in the conversations. Was hopefully for having next level of study for station done, but it's not done. Being worked on so don't want to get ahead of that. Progress is being made but not ready to report. Hopefully enough info by next Rail council as next level should be completed.

4) Freight and Construction Topics

4 a) Project Updates – Paul Libby, VTrans

Dan D. – Pre-storm VTrans already focused on a bunch of projects, so will turn over to Paul for update on those.

4 a) i) BUILD / RAISE Grant award

Paul Libby speaking on project updates. Lot going on this summer, but projects did not stop. Quick snapshot of what's been going on this summer. Every year we do crossing maintenance. Percy Bannerman and Sasa Dejan have been working on putting these together. Percy is the new Rail Crossing Engineer, taking over Sasa's previous role. Paul showed many projects. In Arlington, Mount Tabor and Clarendon crossings were re-paved. Paul showed list of projects currently going on. Bridges, Crossing, some platform projects at various stages. Also included are two previous FEMA projects, FEMA 445 and FEMA 4330. Just getting started with that on this latest storm.

BUILD grant is 29 bridges with upgrades and improvements. This gets us up to 286K load capacity. Huge push to get these out the door and built by 2025. 11 projects are done, 8 in construction now and next season. 10 bridges in bidding phase, and 1 small project to go back to Br 61 in Arlington to do some more work that is in design. A major undertaking. About one more full construction season after this to get this grant wrapped up.

Dan D. - Next is FRA Build and Raise Grant. There's 29 bridges in the BUILD grant. When we put in our application and by the time we get the money obligated there's process, and it takes time. Once you get the money (award) takes time just to do paperwork to obligate/spend the funds. The grant process takes years. We put these estimates together around 2019. Once get to the point that you're actually bidding them, if you think about things that have changed: COVID supply chain issues, contractor availability with a tight pool for other projects. So, estimate 4 years ago is today significantly more money to complete the projects. In many cases now are 80-90% more than what was put in four years ago. We ended up applying for additional money to fill this gap. We applied through the RAISE grant and were just awarded an additional \$10.3 M to go with the BUILD grant that was previously awarded. If take \$51 M in total cost, still have 12-13 M budget gap. We do plan on looking at another round of RAISE grants to fill that budget gap. It's stuff that happens when go through process that spans such a long period of time, and these issue beyond you control pop up. We were basing on historic project estimates we've used for years, but things change. Our federal delegation definitely deserve credit for getting this money awarded to Vermont.

Q: Rep. Coffey – Excited to hear about funding. When do work on Rail Bridges, is it in hope will be positive benefit in Bennington County and in hopes to spread passenger service south to Bennington?

Dan D. in our Rail plan, there is an additional service that would be considered for Ethan Allen. One option is for additional service running south down through Manchester to Bennington and over to NY. What do you need to get there? Well, there's many steps. Bridge condition, Rail condition, safety of crossings that need to be upgraded before the service can get there. This is one of many steps that we need to establish passenger service on that line. To answer this question, this is one of steps that needs to happen. The immediate benefit is to freight. The biggest limitation to freight there is bridge capacity

not being able to hold a full 286K car. This will now allow those cars to travel that entire corridor to NY. It decreases freight cost and allows shippers to move goods more efficiently.

Q: Costa Pappis(VTrans) – There's more news on grants last night heard there is another grant for Rail. \$ 9.6M awarded to upgrade St Lawrence and Atlantic (SLA) to upgrade track to accommodate 286k. All told \$21 M in federal grant funding coming mostly to the state for different Rail initiatives.

Dan D. thanks Costa. Does span VT, NH and Maine, but does help Vermont because rail does not just span the borders of our state. The SLA is putting up the match funding for that grant.

4 b) Storm Damage – Dan/Paul

Saw images of the storm though presentation. Dan spoke over the slides of the damage and recovery. Damage was widespread. The response and recovery was quick. Dan asked Dave Wulfson if he would like to speak.

Dave Wulfson – Huge amount of work from everyone. Would like to compliment VTrans for their quick reaction and ability to congregated all the FEMA people where they need to be. And to be able to help us get to work on this very quickly. Little bit of room for improvement when we get this in the taillight but thank you VTrans and our contractors for helping us to work on this very quickly.

Dan D. – Questions from anybody on storms and how we dealt with it.

Rep. Sara Coffey – Would like to commend you all. Incredible to see the speed with what we responded. What do you think the costs are?

Dan D. – We are putting final numbers together. We don't have final numbers. Some of these projects were temporary and require more work. Ballpark of \$60 some-odd million dollars. FEMA is in the state now doing field visits now to a lot of these sites starting Monday. Next steps will also be to work on resiliency.

Q Carl Fowler – Were you ever able to complete rock-slide mitigation on the NECR?

Dan D. – Not done but will be done shortly. NECR project is close to being able to go out to work.

Q Chris – Curious about VT 107 west of Bethel. Little disappointed to hear had to redo some of that post-Irene work. Know trying to repair quickly as possible, but were you able to put in safeguards to prevent in the future?

Dan D – Short answer--we do look at that. There are many steps, quickly getting back and safe. One of the questions FEMA looks at is: "is this resilient for the future?". Is there any more resiliency that can add to scope that will prevent it failing in the future? We are in that phase now and any projects that get identified and get deemed eligible, FEMA will do a project worksheet and figure out what that scope is. To answer this question, we do look at resiliency long-term and trying to prevent future storm damage.

Q Charlie Moore. Just want to say thank you for showing that slide presentation. Seen similar in the RR industry several years, but what happened in VT was a disaster. What everyone did and was able to do is absolutely amazing and applaud everyone for a great job and getting it done without anyone being seriously hurt.

Dan D. – Thank you. I have an amazing team here in VTrans. Kyle wells is our FEMA expert and will be dealing with this next few years. Very proud of where we are and our team.

4 c) Bridge Management Report – Erin Charbonneau

Cut of 2022 bridge inspection and capacity data. Does not include changes due to the storm, so this has already changed somewhat. Erin shared Rail bridge statistics. Right now, 64% are at or above 286K @ 40 mph. Less than 10% are < 286K @ 10 mph. We are working with our Asset Management Bureau now to do our annual inspections. Roughly 50% of our bridges are considered satisfactory. On northern, all VTR North can carry > 286K. But speed is also important. Erin shared charts on data for all Rail Lines. In 2010, 35 bridges met 286K. Now are at 108 + 45 = 153 that meet 286K, so that is quite a bit of progress, Erin said.

Q Chris – Know is proprietary info, but would love to hear on freight side what benefits / improvements they've seen and how this has helped them.

Dan D. – Dave Wulfson, I will let you respond if you can.

Dave Wulfson – Vermont was isolated for the most part. Today's standard is 286K per car. Roughly 90% of the country now is 286K gross weight. We couldn't carry that 10 years ago, and found ourselves basically being taken out of some of the routes because of the weight restrictions. We are now able to at least compete for that traffic again. Some has come back and some has not, but at least we are not an island in the NE rail structure anymore. At least we are back on the map, and we are very happy about it. We are taking 286K from Whitehall to Bellows Falls. At slow speed, but is moving.

Q: Art – When was buying grain, freight car costs about the same, and you're really getting a third more freight for not significant increase in cost, so for the receiver it's a big, big plus.

Dan D. – It does also benefit the privately owned rail in Vermont, because we are connected to them. It benefits customers in the state no matter what rail line they are on. We've come a long way, but certainly not done. Connecticut River line is one we haven't done a lot on for grants. While some of the Green Mountain may have the capacity, but you may have to slow way down, and might need a little more speed to get up the hill, so efficiency on moving not really there.

5) Operation Lifesaver

Dan D. – Quick report. They were good numbers on operation lifesaver. Still operational and we are getting the word out. We will have a VTrans representative. Renee Layton, one of our project managers, is Also an Operation Lifesaver volunteer. We're still plugged in and still involved.

6) Public Input

Trini B – Pan Am sale went through, this opens up new operating rates. Want to speak about that Dan?

Dan D. – Was hoping could do that with Charles Hunter. Dave Wulfson do you want to give us any insight on that sale. That sale in the new operation of the B&E that is a subsidiary of Genesee & Wyoming and is operating in the capacity of Pan Am in that location.

Dave Wulfson – Still a work in progress. There's a bunch of interchanges that are embargoed because of the changeover. Hoping will be straighten out. CSX purchased all assets of Pan Am Southern. In our appeal to the Transportation Board because of competition changes in the Northeast we were able to get track rights of NECR allows us to connect our own trains at Bellows Falls to White River Junction . Allows us to keep competition. Allows us to do more business than we did before. Selden was the one who worked on this. Suggest we put this on the agenda for next meeting, and we can go into more detail in how this affects us. Is a huge change in rail map for VT and New England.

Dan D. – Will bring up at the next council meeting.

Q Colin Larson – First time attending. Want to say thank you for updates on timetable improvements and repairs being made to tracks. Is there near-term plan for opportunities to look into funding to make required signal improvements on Ethan Allen route to increase train speeds to 80 mph?

Dan D. – The short answer on that is that it's not . Right now we are running at 59 mph. To get train to 80 mph would require significant upgrades in track signals. Not on our priority list as the difference in speeds at this point is probably not the next investment we would be looking to make. It changes a lot of things to get to 80 mph. Not on the short-term horizon. Our priority right now as far as projects go are bridges at 286K and additional service between Rutland and Hoosick NY.

Q: Jake Twarog – Next step to extend Vermont to Montreal? But any plans to extend Ethan Allen express to Montreal, rather than having to do time transfer at Essex Jct.?

Dan D. – this does come up in many rail council meetings. It's sort of in the list of things to consider, but we have to get the Vermonter to Montreal first. So that's our goal. Getting pre-clearance facility done, track work to meet security criteria on both sides of the border. That will open the door to look at getting services there.

Carl Fowler – Will you have presentation available on the VTrans website?

Dan D. – We'll try to put up a link to that on the VTrans website, but probably won't be able to download it due to its size.

Carl Fowler – Would like to see agenda as handout in next meeting.

7) Next Scheduled Meeting

Next Meeting: Thursday December 14th, 2023, 1 PM – 3 PM

Fully intending to have in-person meeting room for that meeting. So hopefully we can accomplish that. We'll see if works out.

8) Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 3:10 PM.