

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 ADVISORY COUNCIL
MINUTES OF MEETING
DILL BUILDING
2178 AIRPORT ROAD, Rm 135
BARRE, VT 05641
and VIRTUALLY VIA MS TEAMS
February 6th, 2024**

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Carl Fowler	Joann Erenhouse
Arthur (Art) Whitman (T)	Chris Andreasson
Charlie Moore (T)	Charles Hunter (NECR / G+W)
Rick Moulton	

T – present via MS Teams

ATTENDEES:

Delabruere, Daniel (VTrans)	Cbratton	Nummy, John (VTrans)
Layton, Renee (VTrans)	Brophy, Jane	Ostebo, Kurt (Amtrak)
Libby, Paul (VTrans)	Carissa Finnerty	Parker, Christopher
Tillberg, David (VTrans)	Brassard, Trini (VTrans)	Richard Tetrault
Owen, Jason (VTrans)	Brophy, Jane (Amtrak)	Pelletier, Dave (VTrans)
Bannerman, Percy (VTrans)	Chester Telegraph	Walker, Mark (VTrans)
Kilbride, Allyson (VTrans)	Clark, Margaret T (Amtrak)	Pelletier, Dave (VTrans)
Kaplan, Isaac (VTrans)	Colin Larsen (Amtrak)	Scott Burbank
Neaderland, Zoe (VTrans)	Dan Peacock	Wilson, John (Manchester, NH)
Preson Bistrow (Town of Chester)	Dejan, Sasa (VTrans)	Tom Knight
Selden Houghton (VRS)	Eleni Churchill	Logan Nicoll
Ryan Loucy (VRS)	Evan Gould	Richard Lee
Chittenden, Kevin (Amtrak)	Jak Tiano	Cheryl Joy Lipton
Reuben MacMartin (CVRPC)	Jake Twarog	
<i>via Teams:</i>	Songhurst, Karen (VTrans)	
802-343-5096 (VRS)	Michael Arnold	
Alex H	Natale, Christopher M (Amtrak)	
Ben Heckscher		

1) Call to Order & Introductions

Dan Delabruere called the meeting to order at 1:00 PM. Introductions were done. We are recording meeting Dan said.

2) Approval of Previous Minutes

Previous Minutes from September 21st, 2023

Minor corrections from Carl Fowler. Third page near bottom, "are we doing off-passenger service quickly", I wasn't sure what was saying so please strike that. Carl said under storm damage section, with discussion about rock slope on the NECR, he assumes we will get into rock slope and whether that is in the budget. He would just like to make a note that he appreciates the fact that it was responded to. On the last page, where says he would like to see agenda for next meeting, point was to try to get the handouts, such as budget sheets just picked up, before the meeting. He said we've always gotten the agenda before the meeting. Dan D. said Y'eah we can do better, and we'll see if we can get them online and before the meeting. The budget was just recently approved.' Carl said with those corrections making motion to approve the minutes as amended. Joann Erenhouse seconded.

MOTION by Carl Fowler, SECOND by Joann Erenhouse, to approve the minutes of 9/21/23 as amended.

Dan, said for approval of minutes as corrected: all those in favor say 'aye'. Online if no objections stay silent. Minutes approved as amended.

3) FY 2025 Budget Review

Dan spoke about FY 25 budget. For FY 25 there are 29 BUILD-based projects in this budget. FY 25 is the last year to get all those projects done. It will be a tight year, but if everything goes as planned, we should be on schedule to complete all of our projects in the BUILD grant. There are also 19 FEMA projects in this budget. Some of them are from previous storms. We're about similar budget compared to last year, but a little higher due to the schedule of the BUILD projects. Dan started at the top of the project list and went down through them one by one.

Question from Carl. Amtrak-Montreal station project. Is that a joint project with other participants on the route? What was included in that study? Dan, this is a placeholder. We know next step is coming, we don't know when. We're trying to have money available to participate in the next step.

For platform projects, those are all going to be to 8" above the rail head so still will be used an elevator for handicapped folks? Dan – Yes, because they also have to be usable by freight. So, we cannot put high level platforms.

Carl - Hartford canopy at the station, would be good to have at least a small amount of canopy to protect people waiting outside there. Same comment applies at Rockingham. Only looking at rehabbing that portion along NECR, not GMRC. Dan- that is correct. Where is the new Brattleboro station? Dan, No, that is not a VTrans budgeted item. That is an Amtrak project. Amtrak did announce they plan on breaking ground this Spring at Brattleboro. Now that we're getting ready to go to construction, should get them to do a presentation at rail council.

Carl - In the statewide support, surprised to see \$7M is coming from a federal grant or is that project highway mitigation funds? Dan – we are using what is called a CMAC grant and that is mitigation funding. So, it is federal eligible.

Question – Notice none of the FEMA money is listed as federal, is that just because it's a different bucket? Dan – there will end up being a transfer. Depending on the disaster, the State gets reimbursed a percentage based on the size of the storm. This latest one, well, numbers still coming in, but is being forecasted as a 90% / 10 % Federal / State split. So, we put money in and they pay us back later.

Question Chris, - Was able to get hands on info that for 2023 looks like we had a total of 188K riders. and one of the pages in the performance report, you have a section for intercity cost per passenger both for Route 7 and for White River south, and this is for the bus subsidy the State funds and interesting looking at 2022 the subsidy from the State for Route 7 was about \$67. Subsidy was about \$20 per rider on New York side on the White River to New York. Using Carl's total number of passengers, we're looking at a subsidy per rider of \$46 per rider, which as far as the State goes, that's about halfway for what's acceptable. So, I think it's useful to include that for the report that comes out annually regarding public transit in the State of Vermont.

Carl Fowler – I am particularly supportive of the Burlington-Albany bus services to support more routes. I would like to see more publicity added on that bus service. To get a printed timetable that shows both of them (rail and bus service) would be very useful. We need to do more publicity on the fact that we have coordinated services. Dan – I think we're getting off track on topic for budget. Carl - the cost of getting the timetable printed would be a budget issue. Even if you don't print a timetable, putting up a timetable poster would help.

Paul – we missed the last page of the budget. Dan – We will post this to the website.

4) Passenger Topics

4) a) Corridor Id

Vermont sent in 3 corridors. The existing Vermonter corridor. We added red piece as an extension (Montreal to Burlington). The final corridor, the Ethan Allen corridor, we added was the blue from Burlington down to NYC which we just added. Our third application was Burlington to Rutland down through Bennington, connecting with existing route and down to NYC. We call that the Green Mountain corridor. FRA asked 'what is the difference between the Ethan Allen corridor and the Green Mountain corridor', and we said was yellow on the map (Rutland through Bennington). The FRA said what if we call it the Green Mountain corridor to show its different than existing. We said as long as we can recognize that that's a future corridor and potentially an additional frequency and it's identified that way. They said we could. So we have corridor ids, and one's called the Ethan Allen corridor, another the Green Mountain corridor, and the other ones called the Vermonter Corridor to extend to Montreal. We get up to \$500K per corridor. That gives us money to put together a scope of work for each corridor only. That will eventually lead into the next grant (service development grant) that we have to apply to. That gets into the details of each corridor. First one just for laying it out. It's a scope, an inventory of what we need. Currently, we haven't been awarded the money but are in the paperwork phase to get the money. It's going to be a long process. Dan said he liked the FRA approach, which is slower, but will be more thorough. Once we have it completed, we'll be able to use it to apply for more grants later. We will have to work with other states. We overlap with the Adirondack. We have to coordinate with New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, because corridor ids can't overlap. There can only be one per milepost, so we have to coordinate where the split will happen. After the service development plan, then we have to start identifying projects. Then do all the NEPA documents and so on. So, we're at least two grants away from even working on any construction.

Q: Carl Fowler – You mention that the 3rd grant did not include Burlington – Essex. Any way we could get that into these studies? Dan D. Might have misspoken about that will have to check. Dan – just scoping effort, approximate schedule is next 12 mo. Then we start service development plan which will

take more time because it's a lot more work. It's a marathon, not a sprint. We have to set this up right so that we're eligible for more grants later. Carl - There's going to be new bridge from downtown Albany to Rensselaer to replace the Livingston Ave bridge. Is NYDOT cooperating with us on the design of this project, or is this something we're doing on our own? Dan - no that's not our project. I'm going to have meeting with NY about what's going to be in each of our corridors, and I can talk to them about that. Carl asked Kevin about it, Kevin C. (Amtrak) said that with new alignment, the switch has been taken out and there's no plan to have it. Carl - Are we working on the Vermont side with MassDOT and Mass. proposal? We get a lot of benefit about that. Dan - we do have to coordinate with them and Connecticut. It does get a lot of use. We did put additional frequencies. We have to figure out what we want first. I was looking, and I did just find the proposed Essex junction leg is in there, so I misspoke earlier.

Questions online - Jake Twarog - I want to back Carl on extreme importance of Burlington and Essex connection. This is Vermont's single highest ridership location. Lot of people in Burlington see benefit to walk to the station and take a train to New York. It will make it a lot more convenient for people coming from Montreal to go directly to Burlington, and not have to figure getting to Burlington from Essex. The 2nd train per day that's supposed to terminate in White River Junction on the Vermonter line, I wonder if VTTrans has considered to terminate it 4 miles further into Norwich instead. Dan - No it's not in there, it's not part of the corridor id, and the Vermonter won't go north of White River. Just because we identify the possibility of a 2nd service, it does not mean it will happen. Jake - Can we look at it? Dan - No, we're not going to add that in. It has not been added to the Rail Plan either.

Question Colin Larsen -We don't have timeline for corridor id funding or when projects will start to break ground. And we don't know exactly what the list of projects will be. So, is there a backup timeline? Some short / medium / long term goals on how to improve the passenger service here? It also seems very nebulous to me. Dan - Well no, it's not, absent this corridor id we still have a State Rail plan. We still have projects every year. None of that stops. All FRA did was put in a framework for how we want this to look long-term. We still have our current plans. None of that stops. We still have Amtrak running. We still have services that are great. We are not going to stop trying to improve our service now, we're not going to keep having projects. I only see this as enhancing that. There is currently IIJI funding we can apply for now. We're going to follow our Rail plan. We're not just stopping because we're waiting for this IIJI plan. We're going to be moving alongside it.

Question: Trini B. - Just want to clarify not going to do any good to get to Essex if we're not going to do St. Albans North. So, the Essex Junction piece we're not going to be able to do until we get to Montreal. I know you want to do this, but it needs to be after the Montreal priority.

4) b) Ridership Report

Introduction for Allyson Kilbride who replaces Toni Clithero. Dan showed ridership tables / charts and spoke about ridership. We were happy with last year's ridership. People are going to NYC typically. Ridership a little down. Last year our On-Time performance was a little better than we're tracking this year. Revenue tracking slightly less. On the Vermonter side, little bit better numbers. We track well, though up, and then down. Had a good December. Tracking okay on Ridership. The number one city fare is New York Station. NECR a was a little slow, but we're looking to eliminate some slow orders.

Charles Hunter – Basically 11 min of slow order time will be addressed with CRISI grant. We're into the 7th year. It should go to construction this year.

For the Vermonter, the revenue we think there may be issue with that column in the report. We're looking into that. Looks a little low, but basically, we're tracking on target.

Carl – Both routes were affected by projects we had no control over like a parking structure and legitimate track work. Vermonter also lost a couple buses which may have had an impact. I still urge we produce a Vermont rail flyer that we could put in the rest areas. We could consider making something available that we could put in highway hotels and rest stops. I hope we could restart television work series. Initially there was a lot of excitement about Ethan Allen that may have dissipated. But was good traffic on Thanksgiving, so not like everyone has lost interest. We need to keep reinforcing the message.

Dan D – We had Toni who was doing some, but then we lost her. Now we have Allyson, so we're hopeful that that is going to pick up again. I'm confident that you're right and we need to pick up the marketing again. We had a huge marketing budget when the Ethan Allen was coming to Burlington, but agree we do need to do more marketing.

Carl – Perfect market where people don't understand their options in Burlington. People don't know, for example, that there is parking in Vergennes. Not enough people are using that station. People in Burlington have gotten towed because they didn't understand the long-term parking. Another idea is marketing in a newspaper, either printed or online.

Dan D. – When Toni was here, we did a specific ad saying go to Vergennes because there's plenty of parking, but it didn't work. We tried it and couldn't figure out why, but it didn't work. It's tough in Burlington because there's not a lot of space there and we don't own it.

Carl – Could we lease space? Dan – You could if you spend all kinds of money, I just think that maybe we need to market Vergennes better. Carl- there are other stations we could market as well like Bennington. Options may exist, but there's not enough marketing of them.

Jake Twarog – Looking back at Ethan Allen express, OTP has dropped. If people have to consistently wait in White Hall instead of Rutland, they will still tell friends how consistently late it is. Being able to say it is faster, would be good marketing.

Dan – We are not able to announce scheduling change, but we are getting close. I agree that scheduling conflict is a problem. We are working on it. I can't announce today as it is not final.

Evan Gould – I live in Burlington and take Ethan Allen express frequently. There's not good bike parking at the station. Considering some good bike parking would be nice.

Dan - What would you consider acceptable bike parking? Evan – inside where it was locked would be great. I don't feel comfortable leaving my bike locked outside. Potentially having a bike check. Or bike racks on the wall inside where it is locked in the evening.

Dan – We don't have station attendants.

Evan – Would work even if it was only on the walls in the station inside. Because the station isn't open 24 / 7. I am more concerned about the evening leaving my bike there. Most bike stealing happens then.

4) c) Montreal Update

Currently working with MTQ (VTrans in province of Quebec) on a feasibility study for the Montreal Station. We did high-level with less detail several years ago. Border protection specs changed. Costs changed. That study was due last Fall. We have to ensure enough space for border patrol offices on both sides. The good news is there is still a ton of support. The MTQ is funding this feasibility study all on their own, so there is a ton of support on that side. We're going to take that feasibility study ball park number and turn into something real with design. There are some issues to address. From Cantic on, that's where have to share track. The train has to slow down there so that's a security concern for the border patrol. These are the issues that Amtrak is working on. Hoping to have some details after that meeting. Hoping feasibility would be out this week, but isn't done yet.

Carl – Is there a plan to get work done to get work done to improve speed restrictions of 10 mph on the Adirondack?

Kevin – No, not at this time.

Dan - I think feasibility study will identify a lot of issues. Possibly more hurdles, but some real information about what the next steps are. The good news is that there are a lot of good people working on this. And there is movement.

5) Green Mountain Railroad Passenger Service Discussion

Question: When I read about award for the Vermont Corridor id and MassDOT's efforts to increase service to Boston I wondered if good time to expand line to link with those lines. In order to be eligible for grants needs to get into the Vermont rail plan. So how does an idea get into the plan?

Dan – That line is currently designated as freight. It would require a lot of infrastructure improvements to expand passenger service. All that of that would need to be prioritized. Only have so much money so we need to have priorities. Good news is, we're about to redo the rail plan, so we will be evaluating. The bad news is that the plan is a long-term vision so wouldn't be quick to get it there. It has not started, but talks about getting out scopes of work to consultants will be next steps. There will definitely be public meetings for input. There will be presentations to the rail council for input.

Question: 6 months, a year out? How long?

Dan D – I don't want to say because then I will be wrong.

Question – Do we ever work in conjunction with private industry? What Killington, Okemo, Magic, Stratton, and Bromley work with the railroad to get funding?

Dan D – Obviously, if there was interest from the private sector, if there was private funding, it could still advance without being our top priority, assuming obviously that the railroads are involved. Ours is a plan, it's not a crystal ball for the future. Sometimes new things come up like private money. It's not out of the question.

Chris – Sometimes a new thing comes up like bus service that didn't exist. Might be able to coax the State to have bus service down to meet the Vermonter. It wouldn't cost as much and might show how much interest there might be in the Green Mountain corridor.

Dan – As you can see, we have 2 trains now and are spending \$8M. Adding a new train is not a small thing. Adding a new route to an existing line is not a small thing.

6) Freight and Construction Topics

6) a) Project Updates

Paul Libby speaking on project updates As

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 mentioned lot of build still in the budget. Construction season is going to be very busy. I thought it was fitting that the project manager been running gives us a run down. She joined us a year and a half ago. She hit the ground running for us. Renee Layton went through project update pictures of projects completed last year and spoke about each site. Projects include bridge repairs such as deck repair, painting, stringer repair, bearing replacement and new concrete as needed on abutments. For BUILD projects, 13 projects were completed, 15 are actively in construction. 2 more have just complete design.

Dan – That's awesome. That's a ton of work. Well done, and I think you're going to have a busy next year as well.

Paul – We have another new employee to introduce. Percy Bannerman is our new crossing engineer. He's been with us for over a year.

Percy covered crossing maintenance projects we completed last year. We have 4 job order contracts (JOCs) and 4 IDIQ projects. Percy showed images of the completed projects, showcasing before and after condition. Pavement issues at the crossing locations such as heaving and joint failure were addressed by the VTrans maintenance projects.

7) Operation Lifesaver Updates

We are in the process of getting switched over from Toni to Alysson. Carl is the president currently. Hopefully that's stays the case. Toni actually kept on working on it after she left us. Renee became a volunteer presenter. It's still there.

8) Public Input

Comment Jak Tiano. – I do a lot of housing transportation-more or less that's bus service. There's been a lot that's been changing around housing crisis that's in Burlington. The need for housing is a lot bigger than we think. If we want to address those problems, probably going to be a lot more density. As we think about reassessing the State rail plan, I think we should be a little more aggressive about how we're thinking about commuter rail. There may be a little more than we've had in the past. There's a lot of complex problems that have not really been part of the discussions. Chittenden might be more dense than we thought it would be and just keep that in mind.

Chris– In reviewing the minutes, there is a little more info on status on sale of Pan Am and Genesee and Wyoming. We can't do that now, but maybe that could be an agenda for the next meeting.

Dan we're over by 6 minutes and I don't like to do that. It's nice to see everyone that attended in person. It's nice to see you in real life.

7) Next Scheduled Meeting

Next Meeting: May 14th, 2024, 1 PM – 3 PM

Fully intending to have an in-person meeting room for that meeting in this same room.

8) Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 3:10 PM.

DRAFT