

**VERMONT RAIL COUNCIL
MINUTES OF MEETING
BARRE CITY PLACE
219 NORTH MAIN STREET
CONFERENCE ROOM 1
BARRE, VERMONT
September 9, 2020**

***Meeting held by teleconference**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Carl Fowler Charlie Moore
Chris Andreasson Joann Erenhouse
Dave Wulfson Charles Hunter

OTHERS PRESENT: Joe Flynn, Secretary of Transportation
Michele Boomhower, VTrans
Dan Delabruere, VTrans
Bob Atchinson, VTrans
Paul Libby, VTrans
Costa Pappis, VTrans
Zoe Neaderland, VTrans
Dave Pelletier, VTrans
Katharine Otto, VTrans
Toni Clithero, VTrans
Dan Currier, VTrans
Karen Songhurst, VTrans
Jonathan Griffin, VTrans
Erin Charbonneau, VTrans
Brian Savage, Legislature
Aaron Guyette, VHB
Scott Burbank, VHB
Jenn Conley, VHB
John Wilson, Jacobs Engineering
Tom Knight, Stantec
Chris Saunders, Sen. Leahy's Office
Erica Campbell, Sen. Sanders Office
Kevin Chittenden, Amtrak
Christopher Natale, Amtrak
Selden Houghton, VRS
Mary Anne Michaels, VRS
Chapin Spencer, Burlington DPW
Ashley Andrews, CVRPC
Bonnie Waninger, CVRPC
Faith Ingulsrud, UVM Center for Research on Vermont
Christopher Parker, VRAN
Andreas Aeppli, Cambridge Systematics

Christopher Lamm, Cambridge Systematics
Brian Stewart, Cambridge Systematics
Colin Bratton, WRC
Chris Company, Windham Regional Commission/VAPDA
Devon Neary, Rutland Regional Planning Commission
Henry Epp, VPR
Mike Winslow, Addison County RPC
Shawna Kitzman, Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc.
Phoebe Denton
David Mullett
Brad Worthen
Ben Heckscher
Cameron Somers

1. Call to Order & Introductions

Dan Delabruere called the teleconference meeting to order at 1:06 PM and explained the procedure to be followed.

COMMENTS FROM SECRETARY FLYNN

Secretary of Transportation, Joe Flynn, welcomed all to the meeting and recalled at the last Rail Council meeting the topic of discussion was the ‘overnighting’ of the Ethan Allen Express train in Burlington and then the COVID pandemic hit and a state of emergency was put into place bringing everything to a halt. At this point in time there is not a date certain for restart of Amtrak service in Vermont, but VTrans continues to work hard to identify a date. Science, data, and the budget are the priorities that will determine the start date. Amtrak riders will have to quarantine as airline passengers must do. The legislature has not yet approved the FY21 budget, but it is hoped to have a re-stated budget by the end of September. The situation remains fluid with the re-start of Amtrak service. The current Administration wholly supports passenger rail service in Vermont and hopes to have an intended restart date, but science and data must match up with funding availability. The Rail Council is urged to have patience.

Dave Wulfson, VRS, said at this time Amtrak is running trains to/from Rutland for crew qualifications and continued training only.

Carl Fowler urged looking at restart dates when the patronage will be high, such as during the Thanksgiving holiday. Congratulations are extended to VTrans on a job well done on the Vergennes station and park-and-ride facility. The project shows the state’s commitment to rail in Vermont. Mr. Fowler mentioned the Amtrak computer system shows the Vermonter is available for reservations, but then cancels the reservation. Ethan Allen Express does not even show up in the system so there is no opportunity to make a reservation. Dan Delabruere said due to the situation everyone is in, it has been difficult to forecast. VTrans continues to move forward on the Ethan Allen Express extension.

Joann Erenhouse asked how Amtrak will deal with passengers riding the train, and if there is something written this may help with funding because it will show good faith of

operating safely. Dan Delabruere assured Amtrak does have a protocol. Chris Natale and Kevin Chittenden with Amtrak confirmed there is information on the Amtrak website regarding what is required by Amtrak. Joe Flynn explained Amtrak has a responsible safety plan for operating during the pandemic that includes distancing while on board, closing the café car, taking names for contact tracing. Passengers do have to isolate for 14 days upon arrival and as of now there is no way to monitor this. Carl Fowler mentioned the New York Times advertisement on Amtrak that listed Amtrak safety measures and the Amtrak website that lists procedures for safety.

2. Approval of Minutes

December 3, 2019

MOTION by Dave Wulfson, SECOND by Carl Fowler, to approve the minutes of 12/3/19 as presented. VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.

3. Passenger Topics

Ethan Allen Express Overnighting in Burlington

Dan Delabruere reviewed the proposed work to be done to have the Ethan Allen Express train overnight in Burlington without impeding freight trains including adding a track by Maple Street, adding a switch at King & Maple, adding a siding, adjusting existing track, and relocating the bike path. Estimated timeline of the work is spring/summer of 2021. The City of Burlington, VRS, and NECR worked with VTrans on the plan.

Carl Fowler mentioned access by trucks to service the train and electrical hook up so the train is not idling all night. Dan Delabruere confirmed there is truck access and power supply to the train.

Amtrak Service Suspension Update

As noted by Secretary Flynn at the start of the meeting, there is not yet a date certain for re-start of Amtrak service in the state.

Vermont Statewide Rail Plan

The Rail Council received a briefing on the Freight Plan and Vermont Rail Plan updates from staff (Zoe Neaderland, Dave Pelletier) and the consultants (Cambridge Systematics, Fitzgerald & Halliday). Background information, trends in passenger and freight growth, performance measures, goals, initiatives, prioritization, committed service improvements, and potential recommendations were covered. A town hall meeting is scheduled on October 6, 2020 and a second meeting in the November/December timeframe to review draft recommendation. Issues, initiatives, prioritization, and implementation will be discussed at the next Rail Council meeting. The work by the consultants will be complete in January 2021.

Shawna Kitman with Fitzgerald & Halliday reviewed the online web map tool and how to share input on the Rail Plan update project. Rail information is posted on the state's website.

Carl Fowler urged having the plan address upgrade of the lines between Burlington and Essex Junction, St. Albans to Montreal, and multi-modal connections. Consideration should be given to extending the Valley Flyer trains to White River Jct.

Chris Andreasson mentioned including a recommendation in the Rail Plan to increase boardings in Burlington and Essex Jct. on both the Ethan Allen Express and the Vermonter.

Dan Delabruere pointed out projects being done in neighboring states have had an impact on ridership in Vermont. The price of gas and scheduling also influence ridership. Marketing the train will be needed once the scheduling is set.

4. Freight and Construction Topics

Middlebury Tunnel Update

Jonathan Griffin, VTrans, showed a time-lapse video of the Middlebury rail tunnel project. The detour should be complete 9/18/20. The ballast train has already gone through the tunnel. Miscellaneous work is still being wrapped up.

There was positive comment on the project and the work of the crew for a job well done. Dave Wulfson, VRS, summarized with proper planning and the right teams in place a project of the magnitude of the tunnel can go smoothly.

Dan Delabruere gave an update on the Middlebury platform and parking area project which is on schedule. Paul Libby said the platform is in the design phase. Construction is planned in calendar year 2021.

Project Updates

Paul Libby highlighted projects using TIGER VII grant money. The projects include platforms, bridge rehab, crossing upgrades, track work (CWR, wye in Rutland railyard).

Dan Delabruere pointed out the Vergennes station shows the state's commitment to getting Amtrak to Burlington.

Amtrak Ridership

Toni Clithero reported ridership and revenue on the Vermonter and Ethan Allen Express trains were increasing until the COVID pandemic hit. On Time Performance was consistent for both trains.

5. Operation Lifesaver

Toni Clithero, Director of Operation Lifesaver in Vermont, reported Operation Lifesaver now has a twitter page and hopes the digital approach will help reach more people.

6. AllEarth Rail Update

Charlie Moore and Dave Mullett with AllEarth Rail mentioned the push to bring bud cars to Burlington to serve commuters and residents. The support of the Rail Council is appreciated.

7. Public Comments

- Charles Hunter reported NECR worked with VTrans and Amtrak on tree clearing along the rail line using a helicopter. A video was shown of the helicopter in action.
- Ben Heckscher, citizen, asked for an update on Amtrak service to Montreal. Dan Delabruere said work continues and the connection is included in the Rail Plan. Both Canada and the U.S. feel the connection is a priority. Exact timing of the service is not known at this time.
- Chris Parker, VRAN, acknowledged all the work and accomplishments by VTrans and the consulting teams on rail projects in the state.

8. Other Business/Next Meeting

Next meeting: December 9, 2020, Barre City Place.

9. Adjournment

Without further business and without objection the meeting was adjourned at 3:02 PM.

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