

**VERMONT RAIL COUNCIL
MINUTES OF MEETING
NATIONAL LIFE BUILDING
DAVIS 5th FLOOR CONFERENCE ROOM 1
MONTPELIER, VERMONT
February 4, 2015**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Sue Minter (Chair)
Carl Fowler Chris Andreasson
Joann Erenhouse Alan Cook
Dave Wulfson Rick Moulton
Charles Hunter Herb Russell

OTHERS PRESENT: Michele Boomhower, VTrans
Dan Delabruere, VTrans
Bob Atchinson, VTrans
Costa Pappis, VTrans
Derek Lyman, VTrans
Scott Bascom, VTrans
Lawrence Donna, VTrans
Josh Shultz, VTrans
Erin Charbonneau, VTrans
Stephen Smith, VTrans
Erik Filkorn, VTrans
Joe Barr, Parsens Brinkerhoff
Alex King, Parsens Brinkerhoff
J. Jeffrey Munger, Senator Sanders Office
Chris Saunders, Sen. Leahy Office
MaryAnne Michaels, VRS
Caroline Mael, Amtrak
Bill Hollister, Amtrak
Deb Sanderson, Amtrak
Kevin Chittenden, Amtrak
Chris Parker, VRAN
John Read, TranSystems Corp.
Michael Chenette, Stantec Consulting
Andreas Aeppli, CanteSystemattics
Aaron Guyette, VHB
Ron O'Blenis, HDR Engineering

[NOTE: Minutes in order of published agenda.]

1. Call to Order & Introductions

Sue Minter called the meeting to order at 1 PM. Introductions were done.

2. Public Comments

Joann Erenhouse suggested next year VDTM and Amtrak have a booth at the NY Times Travel Show.

Carl Fowler suggested developing a client mailing list to market train routes based on ticket reservations.

3. Approval of Minutes

October 29, 2014

MOTION by Carl Fowler, SECOND by Joann Erenhouse, to approve the 10/29/14 minutes with the following correction(s)/clarification(s):

Page 5, paragraph beginning “Bob Atchinson urged Amtrak to keep the Silver Meteor...” – change to read: “Bob Atchinson urged the Amtrak connection on the Silver Meteor from NY to Florida be rescheduled so passengers do not have to spend the night in NY.”

VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.

4. TIGER 7 Update

Dan Delabruere said there is nothing new to report on TIGER 7 at this point in time.

5. Rail Council Member Renewals

Sue Minter announced there are six appointments with terms expiring February 28, 2015. Staff will email members regarding interest in continuing to serve on the Rail Council. The membership form is online.

6. Passenger Topics

Amtrak Ridership

Bob Atchinson reported ridership and ticket revenue for both the Vermonter and Ethan Allen Express is doing well as is on time performance. Business class ridership continues to do very well.

Caroline Mael noted January ridership figures will be available in the next few weeks. Low gas prices could have an impact on Amtrak ridership.

Carl Fowler mentioned potential impact on ridership by making three stops versus one on the Amherst route.

Northern New England Intercity Rail Initiative

Ron O’Blenis with HDR reviewed the three alternatives identified in the study of service from Boston to Montreal and Boston to Springfield to New Haven and the cost of each alternative. Alternative 1 offers more local trains and track speed of 59 mph. Operating cost estimate is \$42 million, revenues of \$18 million and operating funding of \$24 million. Alternative 2 offers local and express trains and track speed of 79 mph. Operating cost estimate is \$73 million, revenues of \$34 million and operating funding of \$39 million. Alternative 3 offers local and express trains and track speed of 90 mph. Operating cost estimate is \$84 million, revenues of \$38 million and operating funding of

\$48 million. The results of the environmental analysis show no significant impacts with the alternatives. The choice appears to be between Alternative 1 and Alternative 2.

Carl Fowler observed the capital costs for Alternative 1 are high due to adding passing tracks and positive train controls. Also if there were a train from Montreal to NY the route would be through Rutland, not Springfield, Massachusetts, and markets for ridership are along the route. Mr. Fowler suggested considering not spending so much and providing service and increasing ridership by:

- overnight train;
- enhanced connectivity to get into Boston.

Chris Parker commented on the low ridership from Springfield to Boston. Ron O’Blenis said there is low demand in that section of the corridor.

Sue Minter asked about the goal of the plan and how much Vermont is engaged in developing a rational plan for the future. Scott Bascom explained the service development plan is to incrementally make improvements and determine the need to go to the next step in the build-out. The alternatives of one or two trains to Montreal in addition to the Vermonter will be refined. The station in Montreal can only handle six trains a day, three from NY and three from Vermont. Ron O’Blenis noted the environmental analysis looks at ultimate build-out in totality. Vermont can take whatever steps along the way.

Continued Policy Discussion on Alternate In-State Fare

Caroline Mael, Amtrak, reported Amtrak proposes a discount in-state fare of \$18 and offering discounts where the lowest available fare is less than \$18. The fare can only be secured from Amtrak.com and must be purchased seven days in advance. As seats fill up the fares increase. There will be a limited number of seats at the low fare. The fare is nonrefundable, but can be exchanged for travel on another date. Amtrak can do a promotional campaign for the discount fare. Amtrak will report the results of the fare (once it is in place) and any necessary adjustments.

Dan Delabruere pointed out the fare will be good for customers and easy to find, cost for the call center will decrease because the fare will be easy to find, and revenues will likely remain steady or increase. Chris Parker suggested having several tiers of discounts. Mr. Delabruere said having different tiers could increase the cost to manage the fare which is not desired.

There was discussion of the seven day advance purchase of the discount fare. It was noted most in state travel is a last minute decision by ticket buyers and there needs to be enough time to ensure there is adequate seating capacity. It may be possible to have a three day advance purchase requirement.

MOTION by Carl Fowler, SECOND by Herb Russell, that the Rail Council endorse the proposal for an \$18 in-state Amtrak fare with the condition Amtrak work with

**VTrans staff on options for a shorter advance purchase time of three days.
VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.**

Continued Report on Amtrak Projected Ethan Allen Express Extension to Burlington
Caroline Mael reported Alternative A to extend Amtrak service to Burlington includes a locomotive on each end of the train set. Startup costs include \$3 million for equipment and \$478,848 for the crew. There is a 1,600 net change in ridership projected with 300 more riders on the Adirondack and 10,500 people at the three stations on the Ethan Allen Express route per year. There would be a loss of 9,000 riders in the NY markets and some minor impact on the Vermonter. Alternative B includes construction of a wye in Rutland so a second locomotive is not necessary. Startup costs include \$478,848 for the crew. Ridership would be 10,000 at the three stations on the Ethan Allen Express.

There was discussion of changing the train schedule (potential impact on the north and south bound trains) or adding a third crew (40% cost increase). Carl Fowler said other options are changing the crew base Albany to Burlington, utilizing VRS crew Albany to Burlington or Whitehall to Burlington, or modifying the 12:20 PM train to leave sooner. Mr. Fowler stated the patron projections for the train service are absurdly low and not realistic, and the cost of the crew for 67 miles of track seems excessive. Kevin Chittenden explained the cost covers five regular crew cycling into Rutland plus 28 conductors and 14 engineers.

Jeff Munger commented the train out of Essex at 6 AM is workable to people, noting people who fly on the first flights in the morning must be to the airport well in advance. Caroline Mael said the preferred schedule is to leave Burlington early enough to maintain the schedule at Rutland and to allow use of two trains out of Burlington. Mr. Munger questioned why the Vergennes station is included when Vergennes is only 12 miles from the Middlebury stop. Dan Delabruere said the alternative is only a proposal.

Chris Parker asked if there is a benefit to Vermont to send a fleet of cars to NY or if it would be better to leave earlier so Amtrak can use the equipment. Kevin Chittenden explained the equipment is interchangeable. Amtrak does not charge by the hour for equipment.

Dave Wulfson stated as an option VRS can crew a train Rutland to Burlington so the train is ready to go with the Amtrak crew.

Costas Pappis said the ridership figures are problematic because they reflect numbers at the smallest stations and this has influence on securing federal funds for rail improvements. The ridership figures need to be correct in the State Rail Plan in order to receive federal funding.

Bob Atchinson repeated the concern that the later train times miss the train connection to Florida.

Caroline Mael said Amtrak will redo ridership projections based on schedule and provide a detailed understanding of costs on the alternatives (i.e. number of locomotives and crew costs).

PRIIA 209 – 2015 Contract Negotiation Update

Dan Delabruere reported the Amtrak contract for this year is still being negotiated. The contract ends the end of March 2015. VTrans is working with Amtrak on performance standards information.

7. Freight Topics

Bridge Management Program Update

Erin Charbonneau reported bridge inspections are complete, load ratings on 75 bridges are done and accepted, 32 need to be verified, 17 will be done by the end of FY2015, nine are under projects, and 32 are to be scheduled before 2017.

WACR

Dan Delabruere reported all nine bridges on the WACR line did not rate to 286,000 pound capacity and three did not rate to 263,000 pound capacity. The line will not be open until repairs are done. An engineering consultant is working on the plan to repair to 263,000 capacity so the line can be opened for the short term. The repair work (\$300,000 for three bridges) will begin by the end of April.

Rail Construction Program Update

Josh Schultz reported 13 projects were done in 2014 including 7.5 miles of continuous welded rail Rutland to Burlington and five emergency projects. Seventeen projects (continuous welded rail, crossings, bridges) are slated for 2015 plus three bridges on the WACR line as emergency projects. Twelve crossings were done in 2014 (paving, striping). There is another list of crossing for the current year.

Jeff Munger asked the dollar amount for projects in 2015. Staff will provide the information.

Michele Boomhower noted Bridge 219 is on the list to go to construction and at a lower cost than originally projected.

8. Report on State Rail Plan

Alex King with Parsens Brinkenhoff discussed ridership forecasts, noting the following:

- There are 100,000 riders on the Ethan Allen Express and Vermonter. The goal is 400,000 by Year 2030. The goal will not be reached under the “no build” scenario. Even with the Knowledge Corridor the number will not be reached.
- Extension of service to Montreal (one frequency) doubles the number of passengers. Two frequencies to Montreal gets closer to the ridership goal of 400,000. The operating cost assumption is very conservative at \$11 million and Vermont provides a subsidy of \$4.9 million.

- Vermont does not get any revenue from passengers traveling through the state from Montreal to NY. Passengers need to stop at Vermont stations in order for the state to collect revenue and benefit from the service.
- Extending the Ethan Allen Express to Burlington provides a bump in ridership, but there are two trains to NY (one-third of Vermonter traffic is to/from NY) so the ridership is split. The operating cost is \$6.5 million with a \$1.6 million subsidy from Vermont.
- Albany through Bennington to Rutland to Burlington (ABRB) increases ridership to 83,500. Operating cost is \$9.6 million (combined Ethan Allen Express and \$4 million for new service) and Vermont subsidy of \$5.5 million.
- The combination of extending the Ethan Allen Express to Burlington and Albany to Burlington through Bennington gives a bump in ridership. Operating costs is \$10.7 million and the Vermont subsidy is \$5.5 million.

Carl Fowler pointed out there are 1,714 people per month on the train in Essex Junction now so the figure being presented appears absurdly low. Using the figures the aggregate ridership below Rutland excluding Castleton would only be 26,200 per year in 20 years. The numbers projected for 20 years from now are comparable to the number today at White River Jct., Brattleboro, and Essex Junction.

Costa Pappis assured caution is being taken not to over or under estimate ridership numbers because the numbers are used for budgetary purposes.

Andreas Aeppli noted there are two stations south of Rutland versus more on the Vermonter line. Also the line is only 59 mph and has long trip times.

Chris Andreasson commented Bennington is close to Albany with a tremendous selection of services out of the region.

Chris Parker asked about the capital investment in equipment. Alex King explained the threshold for equipment purchase is when the 60% or higher than available seat miles is reached and with a 1.7% growth rate and extension to Burlington of the Ethan Allen Express that is projected to be 2035.

Joann Erenhouse asked about through bus service. Alex King noted the report looks at trains, not bus service. Bus service is an interim measure until high speed rail service is available. Carl Fowler asked for an estimate of ridership on bus service to Albany Airport. Staff will provide the information.

9. Other Business

Economic Development Opportunities

Bill Hollister, Amtrak, reported ski areas from Vermont had information booths at Penn Station (Ski Vermont) on January 22, 2015 to promote using the train to get to ski areas in the state. The promotion was well received and the turnout was great. Also, in Claremont, NH there are signs at the train station for Amtrak and the Vermonter service and a local bus meets the train each day.

Declining Revenue

Sue Minter reported the decrease in gas prices impacts revenue received by the state and the money available for matching grant funds as well as the capacity for future bonding. There is a \$6 million budget hole due to the decline in the cost of gas which presents real financial challenges. Federal Highway Trust Fund will be insolvent in May 2015. Everyone is urged to contact Vermont's congressional delegation and ask them to make the fund solvent and ensure adequate distribution to states as has been done in the past.

Next Meeting

Date to be announced.

10. Adjournment

With no further business before the Rail Council the meeting was adjourned at 3:39 PM.

RScty: M.E.Riordan