RATIONALE REPORT

Introduction

This Rationale Report documents the conclusions reached by the Plaistow Commuter Rail Extension Study (study) conducted by the New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT), in partnership with the Town of Plaistow, the Town of Atkinson, and the Rockingham Planning Commission in New Hampshire. The goal of the study was to evaluate the extension of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) Haverhill Line Commuter Rail service from Haverhill, Massachusetts to the Plaistow, New Hampshire area, which would include the development of a layover facility and train station. The objective of the study was to develop information and supporting analysis that could form the basis of an informed decision-making process regarding whether or not to advance the project into further design and potentially to implementation.

Based on a rigorous Alternative Analysis (AA) process, no feasible and publicly supported Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA) could be found that meets the study's developed Purpose and Need. As no LPA was identified for the extension of the commuter service, there was no opportunity or reason to progress further through the project development process. The next step in the project development process would have been creation of an Environmental Assessment (EA) in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Completion of an EA for the LPA was planned to be included in the study. This Rationale Report is provided to document the development and conclusion of the AA process and the study.

Summary of Alternatives Analysis Process

As the first part of the study, the NHDOT undertook the AA process to develop a set of alternatives for a potential extension, including a layover facility of the MBTA Commuter Rail service from Haverhill to Plaistow. The AA process was utilized to identify all possible alternatives, assess their feasibility, and identify their potential impacts. The NHDOT engaged a team of design and planning professionals, led by HDR, Inc. (HDR), to identify possible sites, develop design concepts, and analyze their potential impacts.

The purpose of the AA process was to determine if an LPA could be found to advance into the second step of the study, development of an Environmental Assessment (EA). Development of the EA would entail the study team assessing the potential impacts of the LPA and comparing them to a no-build alternative. Development of the EA would be in consultation with the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and would result in a determination from FTA as to whether the project LPA resulted in no significant impact or if additional evaluation and mitigation was needed.

Alternatives Development and Assessment

The AA process started by identifying all potential alternatives. Sixteen preliminary site concepts were identified, including seven station and nine layover facility sites. The AA report describes the process used to screen and determine the feasibility of these site concepts. This first screening was based on the identification of fatal flaws or substantial impacts using input from community stakeholders. The screening of these preliminary site options led to the selection of three paired alternatives (station and layover facility) that were further developed, analyzed, and reviewed.

As part of the alternatives development process, each of the three alternatives was further developed with detailed alternative sketch plans. A detailed analysis of each alternative was completed using data obtained through site visits, additional data collection, or detailed evaluations of land uses, environmental resources, noise and vibration, air quality, historic and cultural resources, and transportation impacts. Ridership estimates, service plans, capital costs, and an operations and maintenance plan were also completed to assist in the analysis of each alternative. Documentation of these assessments is included in the AA report.

The AA report includes an assessment of each alternative using evaluation criteria that was established in consultation with the Project Advisory Committee (PAC) at the onset of the study. The AA report concludes with the selection of a Recommended Build Alternative for public review and comment. The Recommended Build Alternative was presented for consideration by local citizens and officials. The Recommended Build Alternative did not receive local support, nor did any of the other alternatives. Expanded discussion of the public review process is provided below. Without local support, no LPA was identified. As no LPA was identified for the extension of the commuter service, there was no opportunity or reason to progress further through the project development process by completing an EA. The AA report was completed in March 2015 to document the AA process.

AA Process Public Involvement

The AA report provides information about the public involvement and outreach that was completed throughout the study process. To encourage a collaborative process and engage the public and stakeholders, several public meetings were held and a Project Advisory Committee (PAC) was formed to meet regularly as a working group for the study. The PAC included representatives from the Town of Plaistow, Town of Atkinson, Rockingham Planning Commission, Merrimack Valley Planning Commission, MBTA, and the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority. Additionally, meeting materials and other documentation were available on a project website (www.plaistowstudy.org).

The study team met regularly with the PAC to review and receive input on the project scope, purpose and need, initial site options, facility design requirements, and alternatives evaluation criteria. Later meetings were held to review the three alternatives and develop a Recommended Build Alternative. The final PAC meeting resulted in a consensus agreement that led to the selection of a Recommended Build Alternative that was presented for public review and comment at the final public meeting held in February 2015.

The NHDOT held four public meetings during the AA process. The first meeting, a listening session, was held in August 2013 to introduce the study to the public and provide an overview of the NEPA process that would be used during the study to evaluate potential projects such as the extension of commuter rail to Plaistow. During the first meeting, the study team highlighted the previous efforts to consider the extension of MBTA commuter rail to the Plaistow area, but explained that these efforts had not been conducted in a manner that would support the development of an EA. The study team emphasized that the process for this study would be conducted without consideration of previous work and that no past conclusions relative to potential station and layover sites would be used. The public was informed that the decision to not support the extension of commuter service to the Plaistow area was a possible outcome of the study effort.

Three additional public meetings were held at key stages during the study process. The second meeting, in May 2014, introduced preliminary site options. Based on the public input, the preliminary site options were narrowed down to three paired alternatives that were further developed and presented to the public at the third meeting held in October 2014. Based on additional public comments and PAC input, the results of the AA, with the Recommended Build Alternative, were presented at the fourth public meeting held in February 2015.

Recommended Build Alternative

Based on the preliminary public input and the consensus agreement of the PAC received during the course of the AA process, a Recommended Build Alternative was identified for additional public review as the potential LPA.

The Recommended Build Alternative is identified in the AA report as Alternative II (see the AA report for further detail). Alternative II is a co-located site with both the station and layover facility located on Joanne Drive just east of Route 125 (Plaistow Road) in Plaistow, New Hampshire. The site is located on the west side of the dual main line tracks. A new dedicated track splits from the westerly main line track and provides access to both the station platform and the layover facility. The dedicated new station track is 1,745 feet long and would allow a train set to move from the layover facility to the station without using the main line track. The new track includes a 1,218 foot long tail track, easterly of the station, which facilitates movement between the station and the layover facility.

The high-level station platform is 835-feet long and runs parallel to the track. A small kiss-and-ride area is located at the southern end of the platform. A sidewalk connects the station platform to two parking lots located on either side of Joanne Drive. The parking lots were sited to avoid wetlands and potential vernal pools. The approximate number of parking spaces is 219.

The layover facility is located on the western portion of the site, angled away from the main line track. A single track enters the layover facility and splits into three pairs of track. The layover tracks are situated to avoid wetlands, ponds, and potential vernal pools. Access to the crew facility and parking lot that are

located west of the layover tracks is from a turn around access road that allows trucks to enter northbound traffic on Route 125 (Plaistow Road).

Summary of Recommended Build Alternative Impacts

Alternative II (Joanne Drive) was selected as the Recommended Build Alternative because it had the service utility needed with the least amount of impacts to the local community. From a traffic perspective, the site location on Joanne Drive offers good regional access for the station. The station would be located just one-quarter mile from an existing signalized intersection at Route 125 (Plaistow Road) and East Road. Future improvements on Route 125 are planned for completion in the near-term that support placement of a station at this location. Based on the initial analysis, traffic impacts at this location are anticipated to be minimal.

Alternative II offers a co-located facility that is operationally ideal. The co-location allows for train movement between the station and layover facility without requiring access to the main line track; this reduces the impact to Amtrak and freight services.

Due to the environmental conditions and grade differentials of the site, site design would require grading and fill or a new bridge to construct a track from the layover facility tracks to the main line track. To mitigate impacts on wetlands and avoid other water resources, a bridge and retaining walls would be required. This additional site work to avoid wetland areas comes at a premium cost of $50.5 million. Additionally, due to the avoidance of wetland areas and grading issues, the parking for the station is not directly adjacent to the station and there is a limited opportunity for expansion of the parking lot.

The Alternative II site would be located adjacent to existing commercial development on Route 125 (Plaistow Road). While Alternative II requires the acquisition and demolition of three residential properties, the site has the fewest number of residences located within one-half mile. This site is isolated from existing schools and residential areas and offers low potential for noise impacts. Additionally, this site has few potential recognized environmental concerns and low potential for historical, cultural, or archaeological resource impacts.

Development of a station on the Alternative II site could increase the redevelopment potential of the adjacent industrial and town-owned properties to the north. The proximity of Alternative II to these redevelopment sites and Plaistow Village would support the potential for future mixed-use or transit-oriented development (TOD).

Presentation of Recommended Alternative for Public Review

The Recommended Build Alternative was presented to the public as the potential build alternative at a public informational meeting held on February 24, 2015. Most public comments received at the meeting were in opposition to the project as a whole and questioned the viability of any alternative. Limited

support for the project or any of the alternatives, including the Recommended Build Alternative, was expressed.

Additionally, the Town of Plaistow held its annual Town Meeting on March 10, 2015. The following two warrant articles related to commuter rail were placed on town meeting ballot:

- Article P-15-18 was proposed by the Board of Selectmen to authorize the Board of Selectman to call a special town meeting within four months of acceptance of the study. The article read:

  Shall the Town vote to raise and appropriate up to the sum of $3,000 for the purpose of allowing the Board of Selectmen to call a Special Town Meeting within four months of acceptance of the Plaistow commuter rail extension study to allow for the citizens of Plaistow to vote in favor or against the potential extension of MBTA commuter rail service (including a train station and layover facility) from Haverhill, MA to Plaistow, NH?

- Article P-15-21 was a citizens' petition on whether residents are in favor of the extension of MBTA rail service from Haverhill into Plaistow. The article read:

  Are you in favor of the extension of MBTA Rail Service from Haverhill, MA into Plaistow, which extension will include the construction and operation of a passenger station in Plaistow and an end-of-line layover yard in Plaistow or within a mile of Plaistow? [Yes or No]

The majority of Plaistow voters were not in favor of either of the warrant articles. Nearly 70 percent of voters voted against the warrant article proposed by the Board of Selectmen (P-15-18) to hold a special town meeting to allow citizens to vote on the project once the study was completed and 83 percent of voters voted against the second warrant article that was proposed by the citizens (P-15-21). The overwhelming majority of voters who voted no for Article P-15-21 thus indicated they were against the project in its entirety. The public affirmed the lack of support for the project by voting overwhelming to not hold a special town meeting and second vote (P-15-18).

Additionally, the Governor's Executive Council met on March 13, 2015 to vote on an extension of the study contract with HDR Engineering, NHDOT's consultant, from March 31, 2015 to June 1, 2015. The purpose of the extension was to allow more time to solicit public input as part of the finalization of the AA report and the preparation of the EA. Citing the votes of the Town of Plaistow earlier in the week as evidence that the study need not progress further, the Executive Council voted 5-0 against the contract extension.

Conclusion

Through application of the AA process, a Recommended Build Alternative was identified that included all the required elements, operating requirements, and necessary infrastructure for the extension of MBTA commuter rail service from Haverhill, MA to Plaistow, NH. Although the impacts of the project were either avoided or mitigated to a level that was believed would not be significant, the Recommended Build Alternative was not accepted by the public and thus an LPA was unable to be developed.

The evidence of lack of local support for the project includes comments expressed in opposition to the project made at public meetings, including the final public meeting on February 24, 2015, and the large majority of votes cast in opposition to the project as part of the March 10, 2015 Town of Plaistow vote. The lack of public support at the state government level was affirmed through the NH Executive Council's action to not approve an extension of the study consultant contract that would enable continued advancement of the project development process. As elected state officials, the Executive Council must approve all contractual actions by the state. Citing the opposition expressed to them from their constituents, the Executive Council agreed that the study should be concluded with no preferred alternative identified.

Without support by local citizens or the state Executive Branch, NHDOT has made the affirming determination that there in not an LPA for the project. By issuance of this Rationale Report NHDOT identifies that the study effort is concluded and no further work will be progressed relative to the project.