

**New Hampshire State Rail Plan
Public Informational Meeting
February 29, 2012
Portsmouth City Hall Council Chambers, Portsmouth**

NHDOT Staff

Kit Morgan
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Consultant Team

Ronald O'Brien, HDR
John Weston, HDR
Dick Flynn, CTC Group
Jim Stoetzel, Transit Safety Management
Carol Morris, Morris Communications
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Number of Public Attending: 34 individuals signed in; it is estimated that about 55 were in attendance

PURPOSE/SUBJECT: This was the first of three public meetings held throughout New Hampshire for the New Hampshire State Rail Plan. The purpose of the meeting was to share the findings and draft recommendations of the New Hampshire State Rail Plan and solicit comments regarding the findings and recommendations from the public.

Meeting began at 6:01 pm.

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Mr. Kit Morgan, Administrator of the Bureau of Rail and Transit at NHDOT welcomed the audience and thanked them for attending the first of three public meetings for the New Hampshire State Rail Plan. Mr. Morgan explained that the Rail Plan Study Team will provide a presentation of the study findings and recommendations and there will be a Q&A session after the presentation. Mr. Morgan introduced Mr. Ronald O'Brien, project manager for the HDR Consultant Team.

Mr. Ronald O'Brien, Project Manager for the HDR Consultant Team welcomed the audience and thanked them for coming to the meeting. Mr. O'Brien introduced the Study Team and explained that the purpose of the meeting is to share the study findings and recommendations, as well as solicit comments and questions from the public.

Presentation of Study Findings for Freight and Passenger Rail

Mr. Ronald O'Brien provided an overview of Freight and Passenger Rail Findings, including: NH Rail Lines are part of the Regional Network; Primary Branch Lines that

carry significant volumes; Secondary Branch Lines serve many NH businesses; A Regional Vision for Passenger Rail; Mainlines carry most are critical to system viability; New Hampshire Freight Rail Trends; New Hampshire freight rail volumes are comparable to most New England states; New Hampshire Freight Traffic Reflects Industry Trends; Management of NH Freight Rail System; New Hampshire has two Amtrak Routes; New England Rail System: Improvements Planned and Underway; NH Passenger Rail Ridership is Growing; Management of Passenger Rail System; Freight Rail Supports the NH Economy; Passenger Rail Provides Mobility Options; Passenger Rail Benefits Economic Development; Rail Can Support Future Transportation Needs.

Mr. Ronald O'Blenis made a presentation regarding Freight Rail Issues: Highway Congestion will increase dramatically by 2040; Changing National Economy Affects NH; Support for Railroad Mainlines; Increasing Carload Weights Enhances Rail Efficiency; Rail Intermodal is Fastest Growing Freight Sector; NH Railroad Branch Lines Serve NH Shippers; Branch Line Traffic Originates/Terminates in NH and Branch Line Issues.

Presentation of Study Recommendations and Conclusions

Mr. Kit Morgan, Administrator of the Bureau of Rail and Transit at NHDOT presented the Study Draft Recommendations for Freight Rail including: Recommendations for Network Maintenance on Mainlines, Branch Lines as well as recommendations for System-wide Support.

Mr. Kit Morgan of NHDOT made a presentation regarding Passenger Rail Issues, including: Recommended NH Passenger Rail Priorities; Benefits of Shared Freight/Passenger Corridors, Tourist/Excursion Service; Station area development as a rail service component; Regional Support is Needed to Continue Amtrak Services as well as recommendations regarding the Continuance of Existing Services and the Expansion of the Existing System.

Mr. Kit Morgan of NHDOT presented the Study Draft Recommendations for Passenger Rail, including Continuing Existing Services and System Expansion.

Mr. Morgan shared the following Study Conclusions:

- *Rail is an important Component of the New Hampshire and Regional Transportation Network.*
- *Rail Services (freight and passenger) provide multiple benefits for the state, including:*
 - *Economic*
 - *Environmental*
 - *Mobility*
- *Freight Rail services provide economic benefits to NH businesses*
- *Passenger Rail services improve mobility to New Hampshire Residents*

- ***Passenger and Freight together, as the NH Railroad System, is an important resource for the State of New Hampshire***

Public Discussion

Question: If I live in downtown Portsmouth and I want to take a train to Boston, how do I get to the train station without taking a car? How do we increase the feasibility of people using rail who have never used it before?

Mr. Ronald O'Blenis explained that intermodal connections are a very important element of the plan and one of the recommendations is to plan for the connections not only to the stations but also to desired locations beyond the stations, whether by bus, or other transit mode.

Comment: I don't hear anything specifically about Portsmouth in this plan, particularly regarding passenger rail. You cannot get on a train in Portsmouth to use it regionally. Is it possible to talk about getting train service into Portsmouth, perhaps a spur to a station to pickup the Downeaster, to help with tourism, commutes and local parking?

Comment: The only way to take the train to Boston is to take the Coast Bus to Dover but the timing is not coordinated so you cannot make the train to get to Boston in the morning. I would like to start a train in Portsmouth that goes to Boston, through Exeter. The other idea is to have a circulator transit service in Portsmouth to move people around Portsmouth and to a regional train. I would also like to see train service in Kittery as well, not just Portsmouth.

Comment: I grew up in Portsmouth when you could take the train to Boston. That is still feasible but train service to Kittery is not. There is a market, as well as space for rail service for locations east of I-95, whereas the Downeaster runs west of 95. I support preserving the Hampton branch for potential future use. (note: The Hampton Branch, a segment of the former Portsmouth to Newburyport line, from Portsmouth to Hampton is the rail line subject to potential abandonment. The State of NH currently owns the abandoned segment from Hampton to the state border.)

Comment: Part of the problem is people in New Hampshire think that trains are socialist. The rail system in Portland, Oregon is a great thing to aspire to. The most realistic connection for Portsmouth to Boston is through Newburyport as there is a rail line there. We could also have a shuttle from Portsmouth to Newburyport. There is a lot of interest in Concord and Manchester for passenger rail as well.

Comment: My name is Cliff Sinnott and I work for the Rockingham Planning Commission and over the past decade we have looked at a couple of these ideas that you have mentioned, such as restoring the Hampton branch (note: i.e. passenger service from Portsmouth to Newburyport for connection to existing MBTA commuter service) and

shuttle service to Rockingham Junction. On the service to Boston via Newburyport, we looked at this ten years ago. It was expensive and at the time we found that there was not adequate ridership based on costs. Regarding the connection to Portsmouth via Rockingham junction, NHDOT supported and funded both of these studies, but we did not get very far with this, as we could not receive permission to access the condition of line that connects to Rockingham Junction. These ideas take a lot of detailed analysis to find that the investment would be supported by the ridership. Over time, as rail becomes more competitive as a transportation mode, as fuel becomes more expensive, these ideas will get analyzed and the ones that make sense will move forward.

Comment: I have seen the issues with delays on the Downeaster and the process to get it up and running was extremely difficult. The reason that this is successful is because the people who ride the train, the families, the students, the people who don't want a car. It didn't work in the 60s, but in 2012 it does. We have the will from the people; the problem is that the political will is not here in New Hampshire. The political will is the problem in this state. New Hampshire needs to use its CMAQ money to provide a set of equipment for the Downeaster, and it should start in Rochester or Portsmouth. We need New Hampshire to step up to the plate.

Mr. Kit Morgan of NHDOT mentioned that funding was not referred to in the presentation but there will be part of the plan that speaks specifically about funding options and issues. Mr. Morgan continued to explain that a large part of the rail plan is establishing funding priorities, and that the rail plan is a prerequisite to receiving federal grant money for rail projects.

Comment: I'm a monthly commuter from Boston to Exeter on the Downeaster. I would like to ask how we could improve that service. One idea would be to start in Portsmouth. Additionally, there is a gap between 5:40 pm and 11:00 pm for trains departing from Boston heading to points north and that is something that needs to be addressed for improvement.

Mr. Kit Morgan of NHDOT commented that it is possible to discuss some of the needed improvements. In addition, Mr. Morgan explained that the Northern New England Passenger Rail Association (NNEPRA) is in the process of developing their strategic plan, which will outline priorities for improvement and one of the plan's recommendations is increasing coordination. Mr. Morgan also mentioned that NNEPRA is looking at the feasibility of increasing the number of trains.

Comment: Regarding the line from Portsmouth to Boston, to what extent is that right of way protected?

Mr. Kit Morgan of NHDOT replied that in Massachusetts owns the corridor and it is intact. Mr. Morgan explained that the Merrimac Bridge is an obstacle and that there is a bike path in Newburyport but that the basic integrity of the corridor is intact. Mr.

Morgan continued to explain that if the State of New Hampshire purchases the remaining 10 miles from PanAm, that the state would own the entire corridor within New Hampshire.

Comment: From a UNH perspective, we have seen five straight years of declining parking permit sales among our student community. With school and automobile costs increasing the automobile is the first thing to go. This year transit use is up 20%. The students voluntarily invest a student fee that pays for buses and pays to support the Downeaster in Durham, and in fact they are asking for more service. The younger generation wants mobility choices. This plan is about vision; this is the first update that is listing priorities and acknowledging the importance passenger rail. I would like to see explicit language on things like passenger rail on the Sarah Mildred Long Bridge. We need to push this to legislators to acknowledge the state's desire for passenger rail. As a citizen of Portsmouth, the backsliding regarding rail funding in Concord appalls me. As voters we need to make sure this is heard in Concord.

Comment: I am manager of operations and planning for the Coast Bus System. We recognize that bus schedules do not line up with train schedule, the Coast tries to keep the train schedules in mind but there are some differing priorities. It is very nice to hear support for transit in our region. To the people who think that rail should not be paid for publicly, I would say that there is no transportation system that is not subsidized in some way in this state. Beyond the Bureau of Rail and Transit at NHDOT, I would like to see this issue moved up farther at NHDOT. There needs to be a mindset to de-incentivize road construction and marry that with use of the rail.

Comment: Collaboration is going to be the key to moving forward towards securing existing funds. It is very uncertain what will happen with the Amtrak Downeaster; Maine invested \$8 million and Vermont invested \$4 million in the Downeaster and Vermonter, New Hampshire needs to find ways to invest money. Additionally I would like to see collaboration between transportation agencies and regional planning commissions in order to define what role planning commissions should play. I suggest that role be assisting NHDOT in data collection on items such as identifying weight and clearance upgrades.

Comment: I haven't heard any mention of integrating any of the rail plan with the ITS architecture. Another area I'm concerned with is, when looking at some of the maps, it is time for the rail to get into the fight with the rail to trail folks. We need to look at that and see if all of the rail to trail corridors are rights of way that we want to give up. Also it is worth noting that there is a wide demographic of individuals who ride the Downeaster. Lastly, regarding emergency management, I have not heard any talk regarding evacuation plans and de-conflicting services.

Mr. Kit Morgan of NHDOT replied that, with regards to the rail to trail, the plan mentioned maintaining integrity of corridors and the final plan will have more

discussion on this. Mr. Morgan explained that this will be very challenging as there is a great deal of interest in bike paths and some rail corridors look like they will never come back. Mr. Morgan explained that as the owner of these lines, NHDOT has to decide what improvements to make.

Comment: The rail in Greenland is in very poor shape and it is impractical to consider anything in the way of passenger rail on that track. I also looked at the Coast schedule, to see if I could ride that to Haverhill, and I could not do this feasibly. The one area that is rumored to exist is the area of defense as there is nuclear fuel passing on the railway. This should qualify the area for Department of Defense funding. It is important to run freight in order to make passenger service viable, so we should absolutely look at increasing freight use.

Question: How helpful is PanAm railways with making improvements? Is there still bottleneck issues for freight that cause issues with timely deliveries?

Mr. Kit Morgan of NHDOT commented that the issue of paying for passenger improvements is not something that freight companies invest in. If they can accommodate passenger improvements they know they will benefit but to participate financially in passenger rail improvements is not something that they do. Mr. Morgan explained that PanAm has actively participated in this study and they are cooperating with the plan and that there are capacity constraints to the west and south.

Comment: I did not see any mention of connections to the ports in Portsmouth, Boston or Portland in the plan. I also did not see any connections to the airports, either Manchester or Pease, that would help New Hampshire compete economically on a global level. Smart manufacturing is the largest employment sector in the state and we need to engage this group of people. I would also like to see emphasis on highway maintenance costs versus maintenance costs for rail.

Comment: I have spoken to shippers who want to bring containers into Port, but not if you can't get them out of port, and that means rail. As a group we have heard intermodal and multimodal mentioned repeatedly. Freight rail operations are going to have to fund passenger service. There are opportunities in the EISA of 2007 and also marine highways as we are identified as a corridor.

Comment: My name is Brian Beeler, I am the manager for passenger services for the NNEPRA, and we are excited to partner with New Hampshire as we go through our service development plan. We are excited about this process and we are looking to work with you to develop and expand the Downeaster service.

Comment: I'm from UNH Business School, and I am glad to see the emphasis on freight. I was wondering if you looked at New Hampshire shippers who might be going over the road and shipping by rail from there.

Mr. Ron O’Blenis commented that restrictions to improve use of freight by rail have been examined. A potential key opportunity is the use of intermodal container shipped by rail. There are current system restrictions on the Pam Am Railways line that would have the greatest potential to support intermodal shipping. The restrictions include a major tunnel in western Massachusetts. We have engaged the railroads and this topic has been discussed. Mr. O’Blenis explained that there is a desire for Massachusetts to progress the improvements that would make the main line a double stack line. Mr. O’Blenis commented that if the NH Capitol Corridor funded passenger improvements that are going to be studied, one of the questions will be what would be the benefit to freight rail as freight and passenger are very much interconnected.

Comment: I agree with this plan and I think the more detailed the analysis the better, as that will show how a lot of these broad ideas get implemented and allow regional planning commissions to pick up some of these ideas. As far as passenger service, I agree that we need to keep what we have and you have spoken and identified the risks to retaining that capacity. From my perspective, we make the Downeaster incredibly important to this region. I would love it if the plan could do something to identify a path to understanding how New Hampshire could become a real contributor to the Downeaster. Being more coordinated with NNEPRA is a great start. We have to get to the point of being a contributor to the Downeaster regardless to the obstacles. I also wanted to mention that on the issue of the Hampton Branch, all the communities have indicated support for having the right of way protected and I hope that will happen.

Comment: New Hampshire could pick up on making connections with tourists coming into Logan, and attempt to bring more tourism into the state via rail. Local businesses could package accommodations with train in order to market the area.

Comment: The Downeaster has really enhanced our community. For example, on the 24th of April, one of the conductors is coming to read a train story at the children’s wing at the Exeter Public Library. In terms of preserving what we have currently, my concern is that the state will look the other way because people always put price tags on rail. There have been a lot of price tags on extending I-93 but you don’t see that receive negative publicity in the paper. In New Hampshire the rail corridor costs are front-page news. There is a bias, and the state of New Hampshire deserves a quality transportation system.

Question: Where are negotiations at regarding the Hampton Branch with Pan Am?

Mr. Kit Morgan of NHDOT explained that the state is not in negotiations yet, there has been dialogue and they know we are interested but the formal abandonment process has not been completed yet, though that should happen soon. Mr. Morgan explained that at that point the state could begin negotiations and once value has been established it is matter of identifying funding sources. Mr. Morgan explained that New

Hampshire has bought a lot of their corridors and the state and Pan Am Railways have a successful working relationship.

Mr. Morgan added that, in response to the point about tourism, the NH Capitol Corridor goes through Manchester and close to the airport and Manchester Airport has been working with Providence, which has a direct rail connection. Mr. Morgan explained that the Director of the Manchester Airport has said that they are interested in attracting international flights, but the first thing that international flights look for is rail access because international travelers are for the most part, not interested in landing and having to rent a car.

Comment: I wanted to touch on the issue of subsidies; I read in the papers that there is a lot of animosity toward subsidies for rail in Concord. If you look at the money spent to subsidize rail, you could save money based on the cost of expanding highways. Lastly, every form of transportation is subsidized.

Question: There has been great participation from planning entities and citizens regarding rail, but businesses are the hardest people to get to come to meetings like this. What are we doing to engage the business industry that could potentially utilize rail?

Mr. Kit Morgan of NHDOT explained that part of the challenge is that rail does not really work for most industries; it works very well for certain industries, but you can't engage the business communities with a blanket approach. Mr. Morgan explained that there is a need for outreach as mentioned earlier and there is a need to help the railroads interact with businesses to find out what rail can do for them. Mr. Morgan explained that the focus needs to be on sectors where it can really make a difference and then some of the other industries will follow as rail becomes more financially viable.

Closing Remarks

Mr. Ron O'Brien thanked the attendees for their time and comments and explained that there are two more public meetings coming up, one in Nashua and one in Berlin. Mr. O'Brien told members of the audience that the slide show presentation can be found on the study website, which is on NHDOT's website and that those interested in making additional comments can do so online. Mr. O'Brien closed the meeting by explaining that the comments that have been heard tonight will be included in the final study report.

Meeting adjourned at 8:04 pm.