

PUBLIC INFORMATION SESSION  
MEETING #2  
MEETING SUMMARY

October 9, 2014 7:00PM, Plaistow Town Hall

PAC Attendees:

- Town of Plaistow – Sean Fitzgerald;  
(Alternate) Tim Moore
- Town of Atkinson – David Harrigan;  
(Alternate) Robert J. Clark
- Merrimack Valley Planning Commission  
- Todd Fontanella
- Rockingham Planning Commission –  
Cliff Sinnott
- Massachusetts Bay Transportation  
Authority – Not in attendance
- Northern New England Passenger Rail  
Authority – Not in attendance
- Pan Am Railways – Not in attendance
- City of Haverhill – Not in attendance

NHDOT Team: Shelley Winters, Patrick Herlihy

HDR Engineering Team: Ron O’Blenis, John Weston, Kris Erikson, Stefanie McQueen, Katie Rougeot

**PRESENTATION**

- Ron O’Blenis, project manager from HDR, provided the presentation. Noted agenda of the meeting to include: welcome and introductions; overview and background of the study; environmental assessment process; alternative development; alternative analysis process; and next steps. Ron introduced the members of the Project Advisory Committee in attendance.
- A PowerPoint presentation was used to provide the overview of the Project’s development. Highlights from the presentation are provided below.
  - The goal of the study is to evaluate the 5.3-mile extension of the MBTA Haverhill Line commuter rail service from Haverhill, MA to Plaistow, NH. In the 1990s, the potential rail extension was identified and studied. In 2008, MBTA contacted Plaistow staff to discuss the potential location of a layover facility and station in the town area. In 2010, MBTA obtained the rights to operate on Pan Am Railway Lines. In 2011, Plaistow CMAQ application to NHDOT was funded that provided funds for this study. In 2013, the feasibility/environmental assessment study began.

- It was explained that the project is in the environmental assessment process for evaluation of alternatives. It was noted that the last meeting included a presentation of nine layovers and seven station locations, shown on the site options map. From public comments, PAC comments, and a review of at issues at each site, alternatives have been screened down to three.
- Layover sites are now located along Hilldale Avenue with access from Atkinson Depot Road (Route 121), east of Route 125 with access from Joanne Drive, and on the Testa property with access off Route 121A (Main Street). Station sites are all in Plaistow: one off Westville Road at the existing park-and-ride, a station off Joanne Drive, and one on the Testa property. All sites in Atkinson, NH and the northeast end of Plaistow abutting Newton, NH have been eliminated for further consideration.
- Since the last meeting, further field studies for the three alternative sites have been completed. More detailed field studies included wetland, historical and archeological resources.
- It was noted that traffic, air quality, noise, and vibration analyses will be completed.
- Details of the three alternatives were explained. Each alternative includes a layover. The layover requires six tracks in three pairs, allowing for access between pairs and includes buildings at each potential layover facility for maintenance and train crews with employee parking. The plans included connection to the double track Pan Am railway's mainline.
- Per MBTA standards, all stations must include a high-level platform that is long enough to accommodate all doors for all coaches to have access to the platform for handicap accessibility. The station platform must have a dedicated track to free up the mainline when stopped at the station and for freight clearance.
- Alternative I layover is located in Haverhill, MA just south of the Plaistow town line. There is a reasonable amount of dry land available for a layover facility, but it would require an impact to one business, a stable and tack shop. Alternative I station is located in Plaistow off Westville Road in the existing park-in-ride. The platform is located further north to avoid a pond to the south. The station would affect one business and require realignment of Westville Road.
- Alternative II has station and layover on the same site and is located off Joanne Drive just east of Route 125 and south of the Testa property. Parking is designed to fit between water resources and wetlands. A single lead track crosses the stream rather than the layover ladder. A tail track is located to the north of the station to allow movement in and out of the layover facility without affecting the mainline track.

- Alternative III is located on the Testa property and the 144 Main Street site owned by the Town of Plaistow where the water tower is located. Access is from Route 121A (Main Street). The station platform is between the layover facility to the east and parking to the west. The tail track allows access to the station and layover without using the main tracks, which is required to support freight and the existing Downeaster passenger service with the extension of the MBTA commuter service.
- From the three alternatives, the PAC suggested we develop a hybrid of Alternatives II and III. This option includes the layover from Alternative II and the station from Alternative III. The layover is located off Joanne Drive and the station is on the Testa property with access from Route 121A (Main Street). The parking design can be changed depending on the plans for further development.
- The three alternatives including the hybrid have enough research completed from an environmental and permitting standpoint to move forward in the process. That is to say that there appears to be no significant environmental impact from any alternative that would eliminate it from further consideration.
- Noise and vibration analysis is underway using the Federal Transportation Administration (FTA) Guidelines. The FTA guidelines are standard throughout the industry.
- The Noise and Vibration analysis steps will include identify noise-sensitive land uses, measure existing noise levels, calculate allowable increase in noise, calculate project-related noise levels, determine if impacts will occur, and identify mitigation measures as needed.
- Noise-sensitive land uses are broken down into three receptor categories. Category 1 is where quiet is an essential element, such as a concert hall; Category 2 is where overnight sleep occurs; and Category 3 is institutional land uses, such as schools or libraries. Receptor categories will be considered in the noise analysis.
- To assist with understanding of any noise impacts, at the next meeting headphones with an audio model of the base noise, with added noise, and noise with any proposed mitigation will be available.
- It was noted that the PAC members have been to the MBTA Greenbush (Scituate, MA) layover facility to see how that recently constructed facility works adjacent to a neighborhood. The committee observed the trains entering the layover in the evening. There was observed a noise wall located on the side of the layover adjacent to the neighborhood. The sound wall is approximately 1-foot above the top of the locomotive. Members of the PAC observed that from 500 feet away, the sound of the train was not very noticeable. A walkway and

landscaping was provided along the sound wall, incorporating it with the community.

- At the Greenbush layover facility, there is a sign posted with start up and shut down times. The start up time is about an hour and forty minutes. This start up time is typical for the MBTA; one hour is for start-up and to run tests and the remaining forty minutes is to move from the layover to the station.
- The presentation moved to discussion of considerations of the purpose of the study that is to provide additional travel model options that increase overall mobility in Plaistow and surrounding communities. Travel mode options for Plaistow and surround communities are deemed to be needed to improve mobility and access to employment for residents and businesses in the Plaistow area, while increasing opportunities for economic development.
- A map of the MBTA commuter rail lines was presented that compared geographically how Plaistow would compare to other location of the MBTA system based on the relative distance from Boston.
- An employment-related data slide was presented. It was noted that in Plaistow, there is a reported relatively high level of unemployment. Improved access to Boston has potential for employment growth, which could be a benefit to the community. A table was presented that identified that census estimates show that 4% of Plaistow residents work in Boston, compared to similarly distanced communities with existing commuter rail serviced that have 7% or 8%.
- A slide was presented relative to highway travel times in the area from information from the state rail plan. Travel times between NH and Route 128 can be up to 40% longer during peak travel time and from Route 128 to Boston can be up to 100% (twice as long) during peak travel time. While commuter rail is not a solution to solve congestion on I-93, it is an alternative mode of transportation for potential riders.
- A quote was presented from the *Business New Hampshire* Magazine article to highlight that people are looking for alternative modes of transportation. The article was in reference to proposed commuter rail service of the NH Capital Corridor that would potentially service Nashua, Manchester and/or Concord. The article describes how a CEO of a Manchester-based company was talking to 60 technical individuals and asked how many would come up to Manchester to work—only four hands went up. When the CEO asked the meeting attendees whether they would be interested if they could ride on a train from North Station and be in Manchester in an hour—34 hands went up.
- It was noted that demographic information indicates that the average age in the Town is increasing. To help maintain a demographic age balance, this project

could encourage younger households to move to the area, as well to retain the younger generation who are from area. Additionally, it was noted that station sites might have the potential for Transit Oriented Development (TOD) that could induce local development of residential and business projects. The public was encouraged to consider the potential benefits of the project and ask the question as to what the community wants to see happen in the Town in the near and long-term future.

- The next steps of the study are to complete the alternative analysis, including traffic, noise and vibration, air quality, cost and ridership. Then a final recommendation will be developed based on public comments and input from the PAC to help support the selected recommendation. Then, a Draft Environmental Assessment of the Preferred Alternative will document this information from a formal point of view. The next PAC meeting is expected to be in November and the targeted public meeting is planned for December.

## **PUBLIC COMMENTS/QUESTIONS**

- At the close of the presentation, the public was asked to consider the information presented and offer comments, questions, and suggestions targeted to alternatives and the analysis. During this part of the meeting, the Town Manager of Plaistow responded to some of the attendee comments and provided a review of local events that led to the initiation of this study and how a commuter rail service could benefit the community in reducing travel times, generating local economic benefits, and helping residents reach key destinations in Metropolitan Boston.

*The following comments were received during the meeting:*

- Two attendees questioned the Consultant's use of an October 2014 pro-passenger rail article in *Business New Hampshire Magazine* citing transit's importance to the Millennial generation seeking tech jobs – and a Manchester tech employer's finding that his ability to attract top tech talent would be far better if rail service connected Manchester and Boston. Also questioned was the accuracy (underestimation) of projected passenger rail travel times that this Study's consultants (and the NHDOT Capitol Corridor consultants) have shared with the public to date.
- A commuter to/from Boston advised that he used both the Haverhill and Newburyport MBTA stations. He believed that a new stop at Plaistow would attract service workers and medical trips, but not many professionals. He believed that policymakers should be helping professionals to work remotely instead of developing more commuter rail service.

- A Plaistow resident was a commuter in the past and supports the system. She noted concern about the cost of the trip since Plaistow will be located in a high zone. Young commuters will want to access the station by walking or biking; Westville Road is not equipped for bikes. A property is more desirable when located near a train station.
- A Plaistow resident questioned the validity of the Consultant's proposed use of cell phone data to predict travel patterns.
- Extension of commuter rail service to Plaistow promises to be extremely costly given the amount of riders the service would attract (note that ridership and cost estimates have yet to be developed).
- New Hampshire residents pay high property taxes and receive few services. More transit service would benefit residents and make it less costly to live in the state.
- If Plaistow gained commuter rail service, concern was noted that the Town of Plaistow would have no say in the ownership and/or operation of a station or a layover facility.
  - *The Consultants advised that a potential Plaistow service would involve a bi-state agreement similar to that used for other interstate operations (i.e., the Pilgrim Partnership).*
- The project should not have a negative impact upon the Amtrak Downeaster or Pan Am freight operations.
- The MBTA does not allow overnight parking at the lots that it owns and it should be allowed.
  - *The Consultant noted that some MBTA Commuter Rail lots (i.e., Reading, are owned by the host communities and overnight parking is allowed.*
- A South Hampton resident who is a high tech entrepreneur commuting from South Hampton to Boston, recommended that everyone look at this carefully because the evidence shows that Massachusetts will not widen Route 125 between Plaistow and I-495. The train would allow an alternative and serve as a safety valve. The key question for residents should be where you put a station in town. He believes people should keep their mind open.

*Meeting attendees also asked that the following questions be addressed as part of the study:*

- How will this study propose safe bicycling and walking to/from a future Plaistow station?
- How will the study address commuter parking on adjacent streets?
- Who will own the proposed station and layover facility improvements?
- Would commuter rail service in Plaistow increase economic activity near the station, improve access to jobs, or reduce unemployment in the community?
- What will be done about air quality?

Meeting attendees made the following recommendations, including preference for station or layover facility location, during the meeting:

- The Town’s residents, not the Selectmen, should vote in a referendum to decide whether commuter rail comes to Plaistow or not.
  - *John Sherman, Vice-Chair, Plaistow Board of Selectmen advised that the Board has discussed this issue and determination will be made of how to best include the public in the decision whether to move forward or not with any recommended alternative.*
- An Atkinson resident wanted the Consultants to prepare an analysis of property values, and an analysis of the Bradford layover facility.
- A commenter (New Hampshire Railroad Revitalization Association representative) asked attendees to consider the economic relationship that Southern New Hampshire has with the Boston market – similar to the regional relationships that form the CT/NJ/NY Tri-State Area. New transit services are an opportunity for southern NH residents and businesses – not just for jobs, but also for other trip purposes, i.e., recreation. He also suggested that commuter rail service would add value and marketability to residents’ properties.
- A Plaistow resident commented that most of this evening’s speakers supporting extension of commuter rail to Plaistow are not residents of the Town. Further, speakers’ comments have been essentially the same as provided at previous meetings. She hoped that other speakers would avoid restating comments that have already been recorded. She requested that the Consultants, and/or the Town, perform a project impact study for: a) parking on streets adjacent to a future commuter rail station, and b) police department and community security. Finally, she felt that the MBTA ought not to be expanding service given its existing debt.
- A resident suggested looking at the negative aspects of the Bradford Layover Facility in order to not repeat them in Plaistow.
- A Plaistow resident supports the station, but does not believe a layover or station should be located in the middle of town. He believes the two alternatives located in the middle of town should not be considered.
- A Plaistow resident believes people are not supporting this project because they do not see the benefits.
- A Plaistow resident is concerned about Alternative III being located close to the Pollard School. When he decides to raise a family, he does not know if he would send them to Pollard Elementary because it is located next to a layover facility.

- An abutting property owner to Alternative III (Testa property) indicated his opposition for Alternative III given he purchased the land for conservation purposes.
- A Plaistow resident thinks that access to a station should be from Joanne Drive rather than Main Street.
- A commenter questioned whether a new layover facility would reduce noise and other externalities – it would be the ‘same MBTA operation’. Further, he recommended that the Consultant should change its analysis to label the ‘No-Build’ option as ‘service, 4.5 miles away’. He felt that the term ‘No-Build’ was disingenuous, as there is service in the area that residents in Plaistow use.

*Comment forms were provided at the meeting. Meeting attendees submitted the following written comments after the meeting concluded:*

- A commenter believes every town citizen should receive a postcard survey or survey at voting to see who would use the service (weekly, daily, or recreational). She would like every citizen to have the right to vote on this. She does not want NH to welcome MA practices and anything to do with the MBTA to make us more like MA. She wants our state to continue to be different and more laid back. She said many of us moved from MA to NH to get away from exactly this. She suggests investing the same funds to build a cancer treatment center in Plaistow at one of these stops, then the poor people affected and traveling to MA for treatment wouldn’t have to travel. She believes this would be welcoming and provide jobs. She asked the question: “Will residents have to put up with parking on sides streets with people trying to avoid paying to park?” She stated that no impact study on Plaistow’s police and security has been mentioned.
- One resident says there has been a lot discussion in Town about the traffic on Route 121A (Main Street) and how to slow it down and discourage traffic coming through (to avoid Route 125). It seems that Alternative III or the hybrid option of Alternative II/III would increase traffic through Town particularly near the Pollard School. The voters made it clear that they did not want a train station. Most of them want a quiet community where the business stays on Route 125, not in Town, off Main Street. The resident would not like any more traffic on Main Street. They said in Alternative III and option of Alternative II/III that they do not see people taking the train to Plaistow. How would they get anywhere? They said they could see people using the train to go to work elsewhere and making a stop at Home Depot, Walmart, or Market Basket, which doesn’t help anyone in Plaistow.
- A commenter prefers Alternative I, Alternative II is maybe, and Alternative III is never. He said traffic must not be increased on Route 121A through Town. Since shoppers from MA will use this as transportation, what means of transport, (sidewalks, etc.) will be

planned to the shopping centers? Overnight parking for at least one night should be allowed for those going overnight to Boston as an example. Newburyport did not allow overnight parking, which made it personally unusable when he worked in Newburyport. First train should leave early enough to get to work in the Boston area on time. He does not want the already high property taxes to go up as a result. Last train returning should be late enough to allow a return from Boston sports events. He believes there should be no parking fee.

- A commenter supports the station on Westville Road (Alternative I or II), however she is concerned about the cost. She pays federal taxes and does not want anyone to act as though federal grants are free. She would like overnight parking so she can take trips to NYC, Washington, D.C. and beyond. She would like to provide bike and walking paths from the train station to major thoroughfares, Route 121A (Main Street) and Route 125 (Plaistow Road). She says residents of a certain age here are not aware of the twenty-something generation's tendency to be car-free and use public transportation, and she said "good luck getting the word out about that". She said she has seen trouble attracting 20-somethings to work in Waltham right on a bus route. She prefers not to have the layover portion and wishes to provide context in maps and higher resolution.
- A resident does not see the benefits and asked where did the Consultants get the Plaistow numbers on the slide? She questioned the figure about 4,032 workers in Plaistow, that 4% work in Boston, and 48% work in MA.
- A resident voiced his concern that he thought this was voted down.
- A resident asked "what is the benefit of the project?"

---- END ----