

PROJECT ADVISORY COMMITTEE (PAC)
MEETING #4
MEETING SUMMARY

September 9, 2014, 2:00 pm, Atkinson 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 – Ron Morgan
- 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, Lou

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

Approximately three non-PAC members attended

INTRODUCTION

- Ron O’Blenis explained that nine layovers and seven stations were presented at the last public meeting. Comments were received and considered during the screening process. Since the public meeting field studies has been performed in water resources, historical data, and archaeological sensitive assessment. Considering the resource data and railroad operational issues the options were screened down to three alternatives.
- John Weston explained that the memo was sent to the PAC prior to the meeting is only part of what will be in the final report. The purpose of the Site Option Development memo was to provide a progress level document to describe the alternative screening work to date.
- Sean Fitzgerald suggested the Site Option Development memo should state the selected options first. Sean said he would like to include government bodies’ comments as part of the decision process.

- Ron O’Blenis said the presentation for the public meeting will be sent out to the PAC for comments ahead of time.
- Ron O’Blenis said the sites in the area of Home Depot / Walmart have been screen out. The resources are more challenging at this location. There are large amount of wetlands and grade differential. The site screening memo gives rational to the selected sites.
- Shelley Winters said the Commissioner has seen the concepts so far and is involved in the process.

ALTERNATIVE I (LAYOVER) - HAVERHILL

- Ron O’Blenis said the first map summarizes the locations of the three alternatives. Alternative 1 (Layover) is located in Haverhill with access from an existing bridge. The layover shows six tracks, three pairs.
- Sean Fitzgerald asked if it is a problem to cross the wetlands or stream. Ron O’Blenis answered that mitigation will be needed but only the lead track crosses rather than the multiple tracks of the layover yard.
- John Weston said the wetlands identified by the scientists were based on types of soil and plants therefore the time of year the test was completed is not a factor. The wetland field studies identified vernal pools. Alternative I (Layover) is an isolated site with surrounding industrial land use.
- Sean Fitzgerald said he has been in contact with the property owner of the garage on the opposite side of the layover location.
- John Weston said we can not ignore the fact that this alternative is located in Haverhill, MA and not New Hampshire. We need to understand the agreement with New Hampshire and Haverhill.
- Ron Morgan from the MBTA said the level of deadhead in this alternative is not ideal from an operational stand point.
- Ron O’Blenis said the station, which could pair up with this alternative, would be located off to Westville Road at the existing park-and-ride.
- Sean Fitzgerald said in 2010 that there was a preliminary study completed for a layover in Haverhill, MA.
- John Weston said that he saw the design of this layover. The layover was on the other side of the tracks oriented towards Haverhill. The layout would work great for a station in Haverhill but if you are serving Plaistow it does not make sense.
- David Harrigan suggested including the apartment building near the post office in the noise analysis. Also consider noise levels for 2nd story of buildings.
- John Weston said typically for layover projects the noise monitoring is tested a maximum distance of 500-ft. The maximum distance depends on the base noise. Trucks start to drown out the noise level at 500-ft or further.

- Sean Fitzgerald asked if a 500-ft radius could be shown on a map.
- John Weston said the test limits be shown when we receive the noise monitoring data. He said he brought it up the topic today to put it into perspective that that maximum distance will be around 500-ft.
- Ron O’Blenis noted that the second map of Alternative I (Layover) shows more resources including the floodplain.

ALTERNATIVE I (STATION) - WESTVILLE ROAD

- Ron O’Blenis said alternative I (station) is located off Westville Road. The station has its own dedicated track. The station consists of parking and drop off area. The roadway will need to be realigned, affecting a few properties.
- Sean Fitzgerald asked if there was any way not to take the property located on this site.
- Ron O’Blenis said the property must be taken in order to avoid major wetlands and a pond.
- John Weston explained that the requirement is to have a high-level platform. The station must have a dedicated track in order to reverse directions without affecting the mainline operations. In the past low level platforms were built but now there are accessibility requirements and issues with freights clearing the platform therefore only high level platforms are being built.
- Sean Fitzgerald stated that these alternatives show only a platform and he thought was there would a station building built.
- Ron Morgan said there as been problems in the past to make a station building work. People buy tickets beforehand and jump on the train; they will not use the station building. He suggested finding a happy medium.
- Cliff Sinnott said that in the TIGER application it was proposed to be a low-level platform.
- John Weston said according to ADA regulations it must be a high–level platform. There was a question within Massachusetts about the regulations for passenger service but it has been resolved and a high-level is required. By example, the newly implemented seasonal trains must be high-level as well.
- Ron O’Blenis said MassDOT is supporting the Knowledge Corridor project and three years ago they designed for low-level platform. Now they are redesigning for high level.
- Tim Moore said his concern is not the high-level platform, he believes the length of the platform is the problem and asked why the platform needs to be 800 feet long.
- Ron O’Blenis said all doors on the train must land on the platform. John Weston added that a person can not board through one door and exit from another car door. There needs to be uniformity within the system.

- Ron Morgan said there is problems within the system therefore anything new added should be built and show uniformity.

ALTERNATIVE II - JOANNE DRIVE

- Ron O’Blenis explained alternative II is located off RT 125 with access from Joanne Drive. The field studies provided refined wetland locations. He said that he took a trip to this site with the wetland scientist.
- Ron O’Blenis said the site has major wetlands along with vernal pools and archaeological sensitive areas along the Little River. The site includes a steep grade approaching the body of the track and along the platform. This option would require taking a few homes along Joanne Drive. A retained earth wall would be used to mitigate amount of impact of the stream crossing. This site would require a significant amount of fill.
- Shelley Winters asked how far the closest parking is to the station.
- John Weston said the parking is not located very close. If parking was closer ramps would need to be built from the parking to the platform due to the grade differential. The ramps would increase the amount of space parking would take up.
- Sean Fitzgerald asked if there was a possibility to connect the park and ride on Westville Road and the station.
- Ron O’Blenis said that it was possible to build a pedestrian bridge over the tracks but they are usually not favored.
- John Weston said this alternative preserves the ability to develop on the Testa site. He said in order to connect a development on Testa to the station a pedestrian bridge over the stream must be built.
- Sean Fitzgerald believes that keeping this towards RT 125 and away from the elementary school is better. He asked where the sound wall would be located.
- Ron O’Blenis said it would potentially be located where needed to mitigate potential impacts to homes but the location will be determined when the noise monitoring data is completed.
- Ron O’Blenis explained there will be a tail track located on the existing right of way. This allows the train to pull out of the layover into station or out of the station into the layover.
- Cliff Sinnott asked if the location the existing track becomes single track.
- Ron O’Blenis said the main track in this section goes from double to single. Trains stop there often, which will be taken into consideration for the noise base.
- Sean Fitzgerald asked if there is any roadway traffic analysis being completed.
- John Weston said there will be some analysis completed but not a traffic model simulation. Enough analysis will be completed to show level of service at intersections.

ALTERNATIVE III - 144 MAIN STREET/TESTA PROPERTY

- Ron O’Blenis said this site began with multiple variations and with permission from the town to use the 144 Main Street site, the following alternative III was considered.
- Ron O’Blenis explained that alternative III provides 300 spaces of parking, a drop-off and pickup area, and green space. The layover tracks are against the mainline. There is a tail track located to the south of the layover to allow movement from layover to station and station to layover without accessing the mainline track. A noise wall at this location will be similar to the MBTA Greenbush (Scituate, MA) Facility.
- John Weston said track layout is set and will probably not change but the parking configuration can vary. The layout of the parking shown is as if there was no future development.
- Ron O’Blenis asked if the conservations land could be available for development.
- Sean Fitzgerald believes it is part of the Southeast land trust and would be difficult to obtain.

FURTHER DISCUSSION OF ALTERNATIVES

- John Weston said we have come up with one additional combination of layover and station. The station would be located on the Testa property and layover will be on Joanne Drive property. Discussion indicated that this may be a preferred alternative to the current Alternative III. (Note: HDR looking at this option and will send out to the PAC a revised option for that could be substituted for current alternative 3.)
Sean Fitzgerald said there is potential for a DOT project on route 125 near Joanne Drive intersection and asked if we considered access from Joanne Drive to Testa property. John Weston said the differential in grade and stream crossing from the Testa property to Joanne Drive would be difficult.
- Cliff Sinnott said when parking grows consider a new roadway. He asked if the demo of the building on the Testa property would be part of the cost of the alternative.
- Ron O’Blenis said that the demo will be part of the cost and with the demo there may issues hazmat materials.
- John Weston said hazmat has not been a great enough issue to screen out any options at this point.
- Sean Fitzgerald said we might want to show at the next public meeting what mitigation will be done.
- Ron O’Blenis asked what is the town’s vision and where do they want the station location.
- Sean Fitzgerald said the Testa property as been mostly industrial use but a station may attract different uses.

- John Weston said the Joanne Drive (Alternative II) would be a more expensive site due to the retaining wall and fill. He suggested looking at the past traffic volumes into the Testa property.
- Sean Fitzgerald said the town has a safer school grant to support pedestrian safety along Main Street.
- David Harrigan suggested having a public release of the overview map identifying the sites that are being considered prior to the public meeting. He believes only the people being affected will then attend the public meeting.
- Sean Fitzgerald said he would like to emphasize the positive factors about the project rather than the negative.
- John Weston said HDR's economists have been looking into the development market in Plaistow and how a station would interact with the market potential for future development. He said the Testa property may have potential for higher density residential and some supporting retail. Local real estate professionals contacted by HDR seem to think there is an opportunity for development of this site given local vacancy rates.
- Sean Fitzgerald suggested looking at the cost benefit from the TIGER application.
- John Weston said we will have ridership and cost estimates when we have a preferred alternative. We have been looking at data that calculates the Plaistow and Atkinson residents that are employed in Boston and Cambridge. We will be looking at other towns similar to Plaistow that have commuter service.
- Sean Fitzgerald suggested looking at Rockport for comparison.

NEXT STEPS

- Ron O'Blenis said the public meeting is scheduled for October 9, 2014 in Plaistow. Everything presented at this PAC meeting will be presented at the public meeting along with noise monitoring update. Any additional information will be set to the PAC prior to the meeting.
- Noise monitoring is planned to start next week. Ron O'Blenis asked if anyone had comments of the Scituate Layover Facility.
 - Sean Fitzgerald said he noticed a large difference between the Scituate and Bradford layover facilities. He said Bradford layover looks like they made a huge mistake, there is no mitigation, no sound wall. The space at Scituate looked organized and the sound wall made a great impact on noise.
 - David Harrigan said the trains in Scituate idles for 90 minutes and a half an hour of that is moving from the layover to the station and idling the remaining time at the station.

- Sean Fitzgerald said the newer cars at Scituate make less noise than the older. He asked how many old cars are on this line.
- John Weston said there is a timeline when the older locomotives are retiring.
- Sean Fitzgerald suggested comparing the new and old locomotives to show people there is changes in the system and this is what the future will bring. He suggested video production of each site.
- Tim Moore said start up demands on the configuration and where the station is located. He suggested explaining air quality during the public meeting. He believes people are concerned about the smell.
- Cliff Sinnott said he has been contact with the surrounding communities in order to receive their input in the project. He will schedule series of informational meetings.