

**New Hampshire State Rail Plan
Public Informational Meeting
March 8, 2012 6-8 pm
Berlin City Hall Auditorium, Berlin**

NHDOT Staff

Mike Pillsbury
Mark Sanborn

Consultant Team

Ronald O'Blenis, HDR
John Weston, HDR
Carol Morris, Morris Communications
Ben Ettelman, Morris Communications

Number of Public Attending: 22 individuals signed in; it is estimated that about 35 were in attendance

PURPOSE/SUBJECT: This was the third of three spring 2012 public meetings held throughout New Hampshire. 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 6:02 pm

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Mr. Mike Pillsbury, Deputy Commissioner of NHDOT welcomed the audience and thanked them for attending the third of three public meetings for the New Hampshire State Rail Plan. Mr. Pillsbury explained that the study is an update of the state rail plan. Mr. Pillsbury 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. Pillsbury introduced Mr. Ronald O'Blenis, project manager for the HDR Consultant Team.

Mr. Ronald O'Blenis, Project Manager for the HDR Consultant Team welcomed the audience and thanked them for coming to the meeting. Mr. O'Blenis 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'Blenis 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. Ron O'Blenis 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. John Weston of HDR 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. John Weston presented the Study Draft Recommendations for Passenger Rail, including Continuing Existing Services and System Expansion.

Mr. Ron O'Blenis 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

Mr. Mike Pillsbury of NHDOT commented that on March 7th, 2012, the Executive Committee for the New Hampshire State Legislature voted 3-2 against approving the contract to complete a study of the NH Capitol Corridor that runs between Boston and Concord, citing the high cost of the study. Mr. Pillsbury explained that the study was funded with grants that were received from the federal government and that NHDOT's next step will be to meet with the Federal Railroad Administration and the Federal Transit Administration and discuss what happens next regarding these grants. Mr. Pillsbury noted that Councilor Ray Burton, a member of the Executive Committee, was attending the meeting and asked him if he wanted to make any comments.

Comment: My name is Councilor Ray Burton and I have served on the New Hampshire Executive Council for 34 years, and I am supportive of all modes of transportation in rural America. I would like to commend NHDOT for undertaking this plan. I was one of two votes in support of the rail corridor study from Boston to Nashua and would encourage the department to work with the mayor of Nashua to get direct funding to move the study forward. I also think that the high-speed rail corridor designated by President Clinton, which runs through New Hampshire, should be seriously considered, as it would do a lot both economically and for improving the quality of life for the communities in the North Country such as Orange and Canaan. Some of those alignments have been changed over to trails and I hope that NHDOT can restore those lines for rail use in the future. I also wanted to mention the success of Operation Lifesaver, which has been a successful program in New Hampshire since 1983. We have a very small budget but we have great participation and private rail companies send people to our meetings. I would also like to advocate for a transportation center in the White River Junction/Lebanon area where there is a lot of tourism and where passenger service would accommodate the customer.

Question: For the last several years New Hampshire has invested in improving its bus transportation. Did you look at buses and the parallels of rail and bus?

Mr. Ron O'Brien explained that the plan does not compare bus to rail directly, but that the Technical Advisory Committee encouraged and supported bus connections, and the plan emphasizes the importance of multi-modal connections. Mr. O'Brien explained that there are bus services in a few parts of New Hampshire that are very strong and that indicates that there is a strong desire for alternative transportation in the state of New Hampshire.

Question: Is the bus service still heavily subsidized?

Mr. Mike Pillsbury of NHDOT explained that currently NHDOT owns and contracts an operator for the buses that run on Route I-93 from the Londonderry area as well as from Manchester and Nashua down that corridor. Mr. Pillsbury explained that the Nashua service operates free of any state or federal subsidies. Mr. Pillsbury explained that there

are still small subsidies (in the range of 10%) for other services in the state and that collaboration and serving the customer is the goal for alternative transportation options for the future.

Mr. Mark Sanborn of NHDOT commented that the Boston Express goes through Manchester and through Nashua to Boston on I-93 and the final destination is either South Station or Logan Airport. Mr. Sanborn explained that this service is on pace for about 600,000 riders in 2012.

Question: In light of PanAm's recent petition for abandonment of the Portsmouth to Newburyport line, what is the state's position regarding the acquisition of that line? (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.)

Mr. Mike Pillsbury of NHDOT explained that PanAm is in process of formal abandonment of the Hampton Branch. He said that NH has let them know we are interested in acquiring that line once it is formally abandoned and the state has first right of refusal to that line. Mr. Pillsbury explained that the first step will be identifying the value of the corridor and then identifying potential funding sources.

Question: Why is that corridor not one of the priorities identified in the plan?

Mr. Mike Pillsbury of NHDOT explained that the state does view purchasing rail corridors as a priority as there is very little ability to create new lines in the state.

Mr. Ron O'Brien commented that the state is likely to purchase the rail line from Hampton Branch, but the priorities outlined in the plan are for maintaining existing service.

Question: All of the slides are dated 2009. Has there been a continued downward trend in freight service?

Mr. Ron O'Brien explained that the data that the Study Team received from Association of America Railroads is from 2009, but that anecdotally we do expect to see an increase in freight service.

Mr. John Weston of HDR commented that they have released the current national numbers and there was an increase in the national numbers and all indications say that that increase took place in New Hampshire as well.

Comment: I am a Gorham resident and it's apparent that Maine and Vermont are more aggressive when it comes to supporting rail. We need the Montreal Sherbrook connection through Portland to Boston. We used to have ski trains to that area and they

were well patronized and if they are well marketed and promoted they will be successful. In terms of freight, I didn't hear anything about truck to train transloads. This is something that is very intriguing for this area of New Hampshire. I mentioned this to St. Lawrence & Atlantic and they were interested in knowing they have an opportunity for a distribution center here in Gorham.

Comment: The St. Lawrence & Atlantic line used to be the lifeblood of Coos County for paper mills and passenger service. We need it, as it is the long-term future of America. Right now there are jobs for manufacturing and the facilities here are all set up for manufacturing, they have railroad sidings and amenities such as natural gas. The problem is that the track siding needs to be upgraded and the cost of upgrading is extremely high. When a company looks at the costs, they would rather pay more for the truck. There has to be a mechanism to provide support to help these sidings become functional again because rail is what these manufacturers are looking for when they consider this area. The subsidies for rail would be miniscule compared to the current subsidies for roads in this state.

Mr. Ron O'Brien commented that the Industrial Rail Access Program (IRAP) is a program that can do this, and looking into it is a recommendation outlined in the plan. The IRAP program is used by many states including Vermont and Maine, and Massachusetts is in the process of implementing an IRAP. Mr. O'Brien commented that IRAP works to match money in order to defray some of the costs; traditionally the split is a third of the costs are handled by the state, a third by the shipper and a third by the railroad owner, if the rail line is not owned by the state. Mr. O'Brien commented that the IRAP process identifies benefits using a set of criteria that needs to be followed in order to qualify. He added that additionally there are other programs that recognize these costs and provide assistance to defray the costs to the user.

Comment: My name is David Graham and I am a Gorham Town Selectman. I would like to commend the plan. The Town of Gorham strongly supports passenger rail service. Gorham was once known as Railroad Town, USA and there is a rail museum and a historic rail depot, so the town is very rooted in rail and very supportive. Gorham is halfway between Portland and Montreal and would be a perfect stop for that service and it is crucial to the economic development of Gorham that there be a stop in Gorham. I don't think it's on the plans right now but we think it is important. I think the rail corridor from Portland to Montreal should be a priority; it would help drive tourism as well. If there were any way to give that corridor a higher priority it would be very good for this region.

Comment: My name is Tim Moore and I am a member of the New Hampshire Rail Transit Authority. There is a meeting with the Downeaster operations folks (NNEPRA) next Tuesday so I will take your comments back to the NHRTA and NNEPRA. It is good to hear support for passenger rail and the goal is to increase synergy between what NNEPRA and the NHRTA do and with what NHDOT does.

Comment: My name is Barry Colebank and I am a selectman for the town of Northumberland. I don't think I can be any more definitive than to say that rail is critical to our future, both freight and passenger. We need a reliable, maintained, marketable transportation system. I appreciate this effort, and I believe that we need some concrete action. Over the last several years we have seen a lot of money go into studies, but I have not seen a job or store created. We are getting the feeling that we are being overlooked. We need the rail sooner rather than later.

Comment: My name is Joe Costello and I represent Tri-County Community Action and want to thank Councilor Burton and NHDOT for their work for rail. We have an economic development program and we are involved in transportation as well. We are interested in rail and hope to see some of the corridors revitalized and see the economy in this area grow under the umbrella of Tri-County Community Action.

Question: Is there any hope that New Hampshire will step up and support the Downeaster?

Mr. Ron O'Brien commented that, in the past New Hampshire has received grants and directed them toward the Downeaster, there are also CMAC funds that have been applied to the Downeaster. Mr. O'Brien explained that the plan outlines recommendations for New Hampshire to explore funding for rail outside of the borders to provide support for the corridor within New Hampshire; investing in improvements to the station in Boston is one such option. Mr. O'Brien explained that New Hampshire does not have the same philosophy of investing subsidy dollars as Maine and Vermont do, so in view of that we are trying to make recommendations that are realistic.

Mr. Mark Sanborn of NHDOT commented that one of the ways that the Downeaster is funded is Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) funding; currently under federal law, projects are only allowed three years of CMAQ funding unless the project receives an exemption. Mr. Sanborn explained that both New Hampshire and Maine's congressional delegation supported an amendment that provided greater flexibility for the use of CMAQ funding and that can reset the clock for projects such as the Downeaster. He said that bill is on the floor right now and NHDOT is doing what we can to explore ways to support the Downeaster.

After asking if there were any more questions, Mr. O'Brien thanked everyone for attending.

Meeting adjourned at 7:44 pm.