

PUBLIC INFORMATION SESSION
MEETING #3
MEETING SUMMARY

February 24, 2015 7:00PM, Plaistow Town Hall

Project Advisory Committee (PAC) Attendees in attendance:

- Town of Plaistow – Sean Fitzgerald;
(Alternate) Tim Moore
- Rockingham Planning Commission –
Cliff Sinnott
- Town of Atkinson – (Alternate) Robert J.
Clark

New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT) Team: Shelley Winters, Patrick Herlihy

HDR Engineering Team: Ron O’Blenis, John Weston, Stefanie McQueen, Matt Duranleau

PRESENTATION

- Prior to the meeting, two handouts were distributed. One handout had a list of Frequently Asked Questions and the second handout had an overview of the three different alternatives.
- Patrick Herlihy of NHDOT welcomed the attendees and introduced the members of the Project Advisory Committee. Noted agenda of the meeting to include: overview and background of the study; additional analysis of the three alternatives completed since the previous meeting; and the PAC’s recommended final alternative. Mr. Herlihy stressed the importance to allow everyone an opportunity to speak and requested that attendees provide comments that are pertinent to the contents of the presentation and the options and information being presented this evening. Mr. Herlihy introduced John Weston, who provided the presentation.
- A PowerPoint presentation was used to provide the overview of the study’s development. The entire PowerPoint presentation is available on the project website (www.plaistowstudy.org), but highlights from the presentation are provided below:
 - Introduction and personal backgrounds of the study team members, including John Weston, Ron O’Blenis, and Stefanie McQueen. John reviewed his 20+ years of experience in planning and Ron’s 40+ years of experience.
 - The overview of the study is to evaluate extending the MBTA Haverhill Line into the town of Plaistow and to look at potential sites for a station and layover. The study team’s purpose is to come up with information that the town will use to

make a final decision. From this study, an Alternatives Analysis report will be produced that identifies a recommended alternative that will then move forward for more analysis as part of an Environmental Assessment.

- The process for the Town of Plaistow is to receive a completed Alternatives Analysis report in early to mid-March for review. The Board of Selectmen will review that document and make a decision on whether to proceed to a town-wide vote. Within that timeframe, the recommended alternative would move forward as part of an Environmental Assessment (EA) that would be completed in accordance with Federal Transit Administration (FTA) guidelines.
- Transit improvements are generally done for economic opportunities and improved mobility. Benefits of this project include potential development around the station and jobs related to that development. Said development could create 40 to 1,070 jobs in Plaistow, and an additional 325 construction jobs during construction. It would be up to the town to decide what that development would look like and therefore there is currently a wide range of job creation numbers; without that Town feedback this number has a wide range. Another benefit is the potential increase in property values. Evidence shows that property values increase by approximately 10% in the roughly half-mile area around a station. In addition, properties near commuter rail stations are more likely to hold their value during an economic downturn.
- Improved transportation could also encourage the growth of Plaistow with improved connections to Boston/Cambridge and the approximately 440,000 jobs in those two cities.
- The station would include an 815-foot-long platform with a canopy, parking lot, and a pick up/drop off area. A separate track would need to be built next to the mainline. The layover facility would include 6 tracks for overnight storage and “hotel” power for plugging in trains at night. A crew building would also be built next to the layover facility.
- The study team originally looked at 7 station locations and 9 layover locations. From those locations, three paired alternatives were developed. Alternative I proposes a station at the existing park-and-ride off Westville Road and a layover facility just south of the state line primarily in Haverhill, Massachusetts. Access to the Alternative I layover site is from Plaistow. Alternative II and III have both the layover facility and the station in the same locations, with Alternative 2 located off Joanne Drive and Alternative III located at 144 Main Street. Alternative II (off Joanne Drive) was chosen as the recommended alternative.

- Traffic impacts would be minimal. Looking at the peak hour (6:30am – 7:30am) about 100 additional trips would be generated. Alternative III would have the largest proportional impact to Main Street.
- Noise measurements were taken along the study corridor. Four locations within New Hampshire were analyzed using existing conditions and the known sound of idling locomotives. The existing noise level at the Westville Road park-and-ride is 57 dBA and 62 dBA at the Pollard Elementary School. A slide was presented comparing the noise level of different sources. It was explained that a 3 dBA noise increase is barely noticeable while a 10 dBA increase is very noticeable.
- A house on Blossom Street was used as a model for comparison. Existing noise is averaged at 57 dBA and the proposed project would increase the noise level to an average of 60 dBA.
- A few sites in Massachusetts would experience a noise increase at the grade crossing at Rosemont Avenue where the train would need to blow its whistle, and by a few houses near the tracks off Hilldale Avenue. A noise wall could be built by Hilldale Avenue and individual building mitigation could be completed for other properties impacted.
- Some potential ways to mitigate noise impacts are to build a noise wall or to provide improved insulation to the windows of the impacted homes.
- A noise assessment was also developed to display where the sound of the train would be louder than the ambient noise. Graphics were shown displaying the buildings that would be within that zone, and a noise simulation was available for audience members to hear what the noise impact would sound like. Alternative III would have the greatest impact while Alternative I would have the least impact.
- Impact on natural resources was also analyzed. Diagrams were shown that displayed where existing wetlands and vernal pools are located, and where each alternative would be located in relation to those resources. Alternative II would have the greatest impact, with nearly 1 acre of wetlands being impacted.
- Capital costs were discussed. Total capital costs for each alternative ranged from \$40 to \$50 million. The MBTA has indicated willingness to match federal grants secured for the implementation of this project, including a station and layover facility. Operating costs would be minimal to the Town of Plaistow or State of NH. Currently trains must travel back to Boston empty each night due to a lack of capacity at the Bradford yard. With this plan, the MBTA would store cars at the layover facility and would not need to transport trains back and forth to Boston for the night and therefore MBTA would realize some cost-savings in this operational efficiency.

- Ridership estimates were analyzed. Cell phone data was researched to see how many residents currently commute from the Plaistow area to Boston. Currently roughly 4.2% of Plaistow area residents commute to downtown Boston, which is significantly lower than other comparable communities reviewed during the study. It is estimated that initially about 180 people would use the train on the first day. By 2030, it is expected that approximately 300 people would use the service.
- The air quality assessment is currently underway. Air quality impacts would not vary much between alternatives, and impacts (positive or negative) would be minimal.
- Alternative I – The station would require a slight adjustment of the existing park-and-ride, acquisition of one business, and the slight realignment of Westville Road. The layover facility would be approximately 1.1 miles south in Haverhill and the MBTA indicated that the distance between the layover facility and station in Alternative 1 is too far to be operationally feasible, and that they would not operate out of that facility.
- Alternative II – The facility would be built off of Joanne Drive and three homes would need to be acquired. The layover facility and parking lot would be built between wetlands, and access would be off of Route 125.
- Alternative III – Located at the Testa site and at 144 Main Street. The station and layover facility would be built on the opposite side of the tracks from Pollard Elementary School.
- Alternative II is the recommended alternative. This alternative provides the best regional access and has the least traffic and noise impacts. It also leaves the Testa Realty site and Town-owned property open for future development. Wetland impacts could be mitigated.
- Next steps are to develop the EA and to go through a town review. In addition, funding sources would be examined.
- The EA is a comparison of the recommended alternative vs the no-build. It requires coordination with several federal agencies, including the Federal Transit Administration. Public review would begin once the document is complete. The final item to happen is the FTA determining if significant impacts would occur or not.
- A second presentation was presented by Cliff Sinnott of the Rockingham Planning Commission.
 - The Rockingham Planning Commission is the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) that serves southeastern New Hampshire. It is an organization made up of

representatives of the 26 towns in the region. The commission looks at projects from a regional perspective, not just from a town perspective.

- The commission has looked at many ideas in the past to improve transportation, including bus service on Route 125 and rail service throughout the region.
- Most federal funds in New Hampshire go to highway projects, not transit projects.
- The MPO has a long-range transportation project list and the state has a 10-year plan as well. Projects on these lists must go through an evaluation to see if the project would be effective. Goals for each project are to improve safety, reduce congestion, improve mobility and access, and create an efficient and sustainable project.
- The MPO took a look at the commuter rail extension project from this prospective. The project would have some benefits, such as lowering the peak volume on Route 125 and providing an alternative transportation source to Boston. A multipart decision must be implemented looking at all sides.
- It is ultimately up to the Town of Plaistow to make a final decision.

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. It was reiterated by Shelley Winters (NHDOT) that the draft recommended alternative, Alternative II on Joanne Drive, was based on public input at the two previous public meetings and -four PAC meetings in which detailed information was presented and reviewed. The selection of Alternative II was made through a combination of public feedback, PAC member feedback and data analysis. It was not a decision that was made solely by the Town, the State, or the consultant team.

The following questions/comments were received during the meeting:

- Public Comment – The towns of Atkinson and Plaistow signed an agreement in 2013 prior to the study limiting the scope of work at 144 Main Street to only the town owned parcel (Tax Map 41, Lot 11). Why are we now looking at this parcel (in Alternative III) if it was effectively taken off the table in 2013?
 - Sean Fitzgerald – A letter from the Town of Plaistow was provided to NHDOT after the first round of initial screening putting that parcel back into consideration.
- Public Comment – If Alternative II does not pass, isn't Alternative III the fallback option that would be used instead?

- Patrick Herlihy – If Alternative II does not pass, we would not automatically go back to Alternative III. We would go back to the drawing table and look at all options.
- Sean Fitzgerald – From a town perspective, I would not prefer Alternative III to proceed. I think this location in the center of town could be used for a much better land use.
- Public Comment – What is the frequency and duration of the idling trains? Can you explain in fuller detail?
 - John Weston – Trains start up about 90 minutes prior to leaving in the morning, with the first one starting up at about 4:30am. They leave roughly every hour in the morning. Each train moves from the layover facility to the station roughly 30 minutes prior to departure, so it's possible to have a train idling at the station while another one starts up at the layover facility. During the daytime, trains will stay at the station for 10-30 minutes before departing again for Boston. At the end of the day, it takes the trains about 30 minutes to shut down and stop idling.
- Public Comment – According to my research, the MBTA is roughly \$5.5 billion in debt, and with interest that could reach \$8 billion. It was written in the Globe that those costs will be distributed to the towns currently served by the MBTA. If Plaistow gets this MBTA extension, what would our share of these costs be?
 - John Weston – The MBTA is financially structured in a way where there are communities that are part of the MBTA region that are charged for the MBTA service. That region does not extend to the entire commuter rail network. The region mainly includes communities with bus and subway service.
 - Sean Fitzgerald – In Rhode Island, the Pilgrim Partnership was developed in which capital costs and federal funds finance operations in Rhode Island. We expect NH to sign a similar agreement. We also expect Plaistow to have no operating costs with this project.
- Public Comment – At the Bradford facility, there are multiple locomotives that idle at one time. Also, in regards to the noise study, the ambient noise is different at different times of the day. Did you take that into consideration?
 - John Weston – Yes, sometimes more than one locomotive could be idling at the same time. It's based off of the schedule. There could be times where two or three could be idling at the same time.
- Public Comment – What locomotives are you planning on using for your air quality analysis?
 - John Weston – it is assumed that this service and facilities would not be operational until at least 2020. By that year, the MBTA is planning to have 50 of

its 75 locomotives be the new Tier 4 locomotives, which produce less emission than current locomotives.

- Public Comment – What is the difference between Tier 1, 2, 3 and 4?
 - John Weston – Emission standards have gotten stricter for trucks over the past few decades, and it’s the same thing for locomotives. Tier 4 is a new standard for how much emission can be produced from a locomotive.
- Public Comment – Locomotives that the MBTA purchased in 2014 were Tier 3, and I believe all future purchases are going to be Tier 4. Haverhill has seen a strong amount of development near its train station because it is located downtown, while Newburyport has not seen a lot of transit-oriented development, as its station is located on the outskirts of town. It is important to remember this when thinking about the location for a station. 55 years ago local NH residents were asked where they wanted Route 495 to be located, and they said they did not want the highway to be located in their state. Today I-495 is only in MA. In light of that, think of the decision you’re going to make.
- Public Comment – It is correct that if a station is going to be built, a layover facility must also be built as well? It’s either both or neither?
 - John Weston – Yes, that is correct; this project is looking at a station and layover facility.
- Public Comment – For the trains to turn around in Alternative II from layover facility to station, it looks like the trains will have to travel up the tracks towards Main Street and back. Will the trains run far enough up so that the crossing at Main Street will be affected? Would the crossing lights be triggered each time?
 - John Weston – In building Alternative II, a new separate dedicated track would be built that connects the layover facility with the station. The trains would travel on this new track and would not enter the main line tracks or cross Main Street and trigger any crossing lights.
- Public Comment – According to the study documents I’ve seen, there are 341 residences within a one-half mile of Alternative II. Are you aware of how many people are within one mile of the facility? Also, have you thought of the impact to Pollard School, which is within 1,500 feet? In addition, you said the air quality analysis will be completed based on the new Tier 4 models that the MBTA will be purchasing before 2020. Based on the recent MBTA budget woes, is it realistic that the MBTA will actually be able to purchase these cars? One final point is that based on conversations with residents in Bradford, there is one specific locomotive called “the screamer” that is very loud.
 - Stefanie McQueen – The number of residences within one half mile is based on analysis conducted in GIS. A buffer was drawn from the proposed facility and all of the residences were counted. We did not count residences within one mile.

- John Weston – The number of houses that would have noise impacts is different from the total number of residences located within one half mile.
- Public Comment – Can you have a train station without a layover facility or a layover facility without a train station?
 - Patrick Herlihy – No, either both will be built or neither will be built.
- Public Comment – It was mentioned that property values would go up if this project was developed. In my opinion, I don't think my property values would go up 1%. A train station by itself would increase property values, but the layover facility would not help the town.
- Public Comment – HDR has a \$22 million contract with the MBTA for the Green Line Extension. How can HDR remain impartial?
 - Ron O'Blenis – It is true that HDR has a contract for the Green Line Extension. However, that is an independent project. HDR is a large company that does a lot of projects for a lot of clients.
- Public Comment – This study project is being funded by a Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) grant. The purpose of CMAQ projects is to reduce air pollution by taking cars off the road. With the 300 proposed train trips each day, not many cars will be taken off the road. With the air pollution from the locomotives, how can we justify using a CMAQ grant for this project?
 - John Weston – It is true that this project may not have any benefits regarding air quality. It is true that this project may not be built with a CMAQ grant, so if the project progressed we may have to find a different funding source.
- Plaistow Board of Selectmen Comment – Is it true that the PAC will not be recommending a no-build decision? Will it be up to the Town to decide between a no-build decision or a decision to move forward with the project?
 - Patrick Herhily – The PAC recommended moving forward with Alternative II as the recommended alternative, but the town will have the final decision with regard to advancing the project or not.
- Plaistow Board of Selectmen Comment – Why was Alternative II preferred over Alternative I? It appears that Alternative I has very similar characteristics to Alternative II.
 - Ron O'Blenis – The MBTA said that Alternative I would not be feasible for them. We were headed toward Alternative II as our preferred alternative when the MBTA said that they would not support Alternative I.
 - Cliff Sinnott – Due to the distance between the station and layover in Alternative I, there would be additional operational costs in moving the trains each morning and evening.

- Plaistow Board of Selectmen Comment – For Alternative I, why would Westville Road need to be altered to build the station?
 - John Weston – In order to build the station, a second track would need to be built next to the existing track. With this second track and the platform, Westville Road would need to be slightly shifted to the east to allow enough space for the platform and new track.
- Public Comment – What was the ridership on the commuter bus that used to run from the Westville Road park-and-ride when service was stopped?
 - Tim Moore – It was about 30 people. After three years of service, there were no more subsidies to run the bus and it was essentially nixed.
- Public Comment – Based on the numbers provided, it appears that the cost per rider is about \$150,000. What is the usual breaking point for cost per rider?
 - Cliff Sinnott – That cost per rider also includes the cost of the layover facility. At the beginning of the service, the cost per rider would be about \$30 per trip. However, by 2030 that number would be reduced to about \$10 per trip.
- Public Comment – The air system at Pollard School has not taken into consideration. How will this project affect the air system in the school?
 - John Weston – Currently, freight trains operate on the corridor and some trains stop and sit and idle the area near the school. If the project was completed and a station constructed in this location, these freight trains would no longer be able to idle near the school.
- Public Comment – Mitigation efforts have been discussed to reduce noise. Have those mitigation efforts been done in Bradford?
 - John Weston – No, they have not. Bradford was not a federal project. This project would be and mitigation would be required. Mitigation efforts were done at the layover facility in Scituate, Massachusetts, on the Greenbush Line.
 - Patrick Herhily – This project would not be bringing the current Bradford site to Plaistow. It would be building a new, modern facility.
- Public Comment – There are two articles on the ballot asking about this project. If the town votes that we don't want this project, does that mean that every discussion will be over? Also, why are there two articles on the ballot regarding the project? Another ballot question is to rebuild part of Westville Road. Why would we pay to reconstruct it now when it appears it may be rebuilt in the future as part of Alternative I?
 - Patrick Herhily – Regardless of the town vote, the study team will finish the study. However, the project would not move forward to the next phase, such as construction, without the town's support. Nothing would be built if the town votes against the project.

- Sean Fitzgerald – Regarding the Westville Road Bridge, it is currently not in very good condition. This vote is to fund the design of a new bridge, not the actual construction. Once we have a design, the project would be considered “shovel ready” and could be built soon after. Regarding the town vote, we have agreed to finish this study to get information to make a final decision. The warrant article is a citizen’s initiative to see if we want to move forward with the station and layover facility, and the other article is asking for a town meeting four months after the study is complete to decide the future of the project.
- Public Comment – It appears that one of the Alternative II parking lots is located on the south side of Joanne Drive. What is your plan with the current substation located at that site?
 - Ron O’Blenis – The assumption is that we can work around the substation and incorporate it into the design. We do not plan on relocating the substation.
- Public Comment – Recently, the capital corridor project was introduced on extending the Lowell Line to Nashua and Manchester. That project would have capital costs equaling roughly \$70,000 per rider. For Plaistow, that same cost would be roughly \$335,000 per rider. In addition, as mentioned before there will be two articles on the ballot this spring regarding this project. The warrant article calls to stop the project in its entirety, while the other article calls for a town meeting four months after the study is complete.
 - Cliff Sinnott – Regarding the ridership comment, our ridership numbers are roundtrip, while the capital corridor ridership numbers are single trips.
 - Patrick Herhily – We will finish the study regardless of the outcome of the warrant article. That vote would be to stop a project (i.e. construction of a station and layover facility) from happening, not to stop the study from being finished.
- Public Comment – The town has asked for an extension on the study past March 31st, and tomorrow the executive committee will vote on the extension. What happens if the extension is not granted?
 - John Weston – We would be able to put together the EA before March 31st and finish the study, but it would not be as complete as we would like it to be. It would not include any public data from this meeting, the town wide referendum, or from local and state government.
 - Patrick Herhily – In addition, FTA is funding this study. If they do not accept the EA because it is lacking information, we may somehow need to give the FTA back the money.

- Public Comment – The original schedule was to finish March 31st. The town asked for an extension, not HDR. If the town had not asked for an extension, would HDR have been able to finish the study?
 - Ron O’Blenis – The discussion to extend the contract began in early December. We felt that for us to fully comprehend all of the input, we would need additional time to complete the study. I initiated the conversation to extend the contract.
- Public Comment – Regarding the FAQ distributed before the meeting, the final sentence reads “the town’s decision process is being developed by the Plaistow Board of Selectmen.” It is not clear who will be making the final decision.
 - John Sherman, Plaistow Board of Selectmen – There are two warrant articles. One was initiated by citizens, calling for a vote now to see if we want the project to continue. One of the subtleties is that it is a non-binding warrant article. It will be up to the Selectmen as to how they will treat that vote. A second warrant article was submitted by the Selectmen to call for a special meeting once the study is complete where the citizens could vote in a binding manner whether or not they want the project to continue. There was discussion about combining the two warrant articles into one, but we were not able to do that.
- Public Comment – In the slide of the presentation titles “Next Steps,” it was shown that a decision would be made and following that a financial plan would be put in place. How can voters make an informed decision without a financial plan in place? Also, I am surprised that the MBTA has agreed to cover the 20% local share.
 - Patrick Herhily – A vote would be made based on our cost projections. If the town decides to move forward, a plan would need to be put in place to find those funds.
 - Sean Fitzgerald – There were letters signed by the MBTA, MassDOT, and NHDOT in the past that outlines how the arrangement would work. However, many of the officials in office have changed since then so new contracts would need to be discussed. Currently, no funding has been lined up for the project. We were told that state and federal funding could not be lined up until the town agreed to move forward on the project.
- PAC Member/Atkinson Resident Comment – It has been stated that a station can increase property value. However, no information has been given about how a layover facility can increase or decrease property value. In addition, the state of New Hampshire does not currently have an anti-idling law preventing locomotives from idling at certain hours.
- Public Comment – The sound analysis showed that when the locomotives would cross Rosemont Avenue in Haverhill, they would have to blow their whistle. However, that is

not the only time the locomotives blow their whistle. For example, trains blow their whistle when they start, when they back up and when they approach a station.

- Ron O’Blenis – Part of that information is correct. The train will blow its whistle briefly in the morning when it starts up. However, the train does not need to blow its whistle every time it approaches the station or layover facility, or when it moves from layover facility to station.
- Cliff Sinnott – An operating agreement would be drafted prior to any service starting. It is assumed that any whistleblowing issues would be addressed in said agreement.

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