

**I-93 Transit Investment Study
Public Meeting – October 2, 2008, 6 p.m.
Methuen City Hall
Methuen, MA**

Paul Nelson of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Transportation (EOT) welcomed members of the public and introduced Ken Kinney, of HNTB, the project manager for the consultant team conducting the I-93 Transit Investment Study. Ken said the team looked at 15 alternatives; tonight's meeting will focus on the final two. The screening of alternatives focused on purpose and need of the study, which include objectives of removing cars from I-93 and fostering more compact development around transit.

The two final alternatives were the Manchester and Lawrence (M&L) commuter rail line and express bus service with the bus traveling on the shoulder of I-93 – bus on shoulder (BOS). The northern terminus of M&L would be Exit 5 on I-93 south of Manchester. The commuter rail line would not go to downtown Manchester. This possibility was studied but because some of the rail right-of-way was lost when Manchester Airport was expanded, the cost of tunneling trains through the airport property would be as much as the cost of establishing service from Londonderry Exit 5 to Boston

The purpose of BOS is to get faster trips. It has been done successfully in other cities. Buses would run all day with frequencies of 15 or 30 minutes during peak periods.

When comparing capital costs of the M&L rail and the BOS service, rail would cost \$197 million versus \$88 million for BOS. Operating costs of BOS would be 50% less than rail and revenue is expected to be about the same. Each would generate about the same number of weekday riders, approximately 10,000 one-way trips. Environmental impacts are about the same. But the rail would have greater positive land-use impact because more compact development would be likely to occur near rail stations.

A new Lawrence rail station would be needed because the M&L alignment would not work with the existing train station in Lawrence.

According to Ken Kinney, one of the most interesting developments of this project was how it evolved from what was perceived primarily a New Hampshire project to a bi-state project with significant benefits for residents of both states.

In general, the M&L alignment has higher benefits, especially regarding land use, but also higher costs. However, this corridor also has the greater challenges to implementation. The consultant team does not believe that, under current evaluation criteria, this corridor would be likely to receive federal funds. In addition, there are significant challenges to community acceptance because some of the corridor is used as bike path. There are many grade crossings and there could be opposition to increased noise.

However, because the state of New Hampshire owns the right-of-way, the study team anticipates that at some future time (possibly after the study's 2030 horizon year), commuter rail could be feasible. Land use and other conditions may change and the M&L line may become more viable. The study recommends the State of New Hampshire maintain control of the line for future use.

The study recommends the New Hampshire Main Line (Boston-Nashua-Manchester) should be developed as a priority rail line.

The study also recommends that the two states take steps now to begin the implementation of a Manchester-Boston BOS. This would include agreements between the two states, establish an implementation task force, develop a facility and operation plan and perform an environmental assessment.

Question: With a bus on shoulders lane in use, where do people who have a breakdown actually go to break down?

Response: The consultant is working with Mass Highway to figure this out. Breakdown lanes 400-500 feet long will be built every half mile. They exist now in Massachusetts in the section where cars are currently allowed to drive on I-93 shoulders.

Comment: Sometimes you don't get a choice about when you break down.

Response: Buses will be operating on shoulders only when there is congestion. So the shoulders would be occupied very limited periods of time. [Usually he also says buses would pull into general traffic for emergencies or enforcement actions]

Comment: Minnesota and Ottawa are not good examples for BOS.

Response: Other states include Maryland & Virginia.

There has been only one accident in Minnesota, a location that has been using BOS for some time. We know Mass Highway wants to more closely examine the allowable speed and what the driver training may need to be.

Comment: We have passenger cars driving on shoulder lanes now. I'd feel more comfortable with buses.

Question: When you look at ridership, from the point of view to make BOS more compelling so this would be supported, can we get the potential benefits out there? We think more people will ride existing buses if they can get better travel time.

Response: Good point. During the Democratic National Convention buses were permitted on shoulders of I-93, which improved travel times.

Comment: I have serious issues with the idea of driving on shoulders.

Response: You're right. Right now we have drainage structures in the shoulders; ramps at exits aren't aligned properly. We would recommend implementing the BOS in segments. It would start in Boston where the congestion (and benefit) is the greatest and go to Medford. [I don't think it starts in Boston, does it? That's where the viaduct is and

the HOV southbound lane] This would take \$25 million. There are other planned projects throughout the corridor that could be built to accommodate BOS but the service in these locations would not operate on a patchwork approach.

Comment: Extend out the left lane as was done during the Democratic National Convention. It worked and it could be implemented before 2013.

Question: Have we had any results in the study of how well received the Route 125 shoulder lane to the NH border is being used? What has been the accident rate?

Response: We tried to look at police reports but they were not written accurately enough to know about history of the accidents in this lane.

Question: Did the statistics you used take into account the large multi-use units that are being built?

Response: We used data from various regional planning commissions. Not every specific development is included but generally this data is very accurate.

Question: Why has the Exit 2 Park and Ride not opened? How will you advertise?

Response: The Exit 2 lot and facility has been built; the contractor for bus service has been selected. It will open the end of November. There is an active marketing plan. They'll be a splash when it's ready to go.

Question: New Hampshire has started adding bus service. Your numbers seem a little low. Do you have current numbers? It seems like there is a big increase in numbers of people now riding buses.

Response: We ran a number of sensitivity analyses. One was looking at what the increase in gas prices, equivalent of \$5.60/gallon. In New Hampshire it increased ridership by 20 % and went down to a low of 6% increase at Anderson.

Question: You talk about a new station in Lawrence. People have to cross track now. How is it viable to team up with the MBTA as it is now \$8 billion in debt?

Response: The M&L would increase use of MBTA as it would improve track.

Comment: Without building anything, increasing 1-2 trains now would make a big difference.

Question: When park & ride first opened in Massachusetts, Trombly ran the service and it was awesome. When it first started there was no publicity. When Trombly left, it was no longer express and it took too long. Could express bus be put back in? Post publicity in little shed just so people can know bus is there. Let people know, run it often enough and they will come.

Response: (by Joe Constanzo, Merrimack Valley Regional Transit Authority) We only have five buses, three in service. We just don't have the equipment. If we had a diamond lane, we could run an express.

Comment: I'd like to commend these gentlemen for doing a study that is not just a transportation study but also looks at land use. BOS sounds nice but you will be affected by what ever is happening (accidents) on the highway. We need only to look locally at how rail service spurs development in communities – Saco and Old Orchard Beach, Maine, downtown Haverhill. The University of New Hampshire used the Downeaster as a marketing tool.

Comment: Successful downtowns are built around train stations.

Comment: People in New Hampshire have done a great job with rails to trails – there can be a cooperative relationship between rail and trails.

Question: Did you ask people why people don't use public transportation? I just don't understand why more people don't use it.

Response: Rail transit only works when you work close to the train stations. You see a lot of cars on the road but they are going to suburban office locations.

Question: What would drive more successful transit?

Response: Concentration of employment in cities or near transit and expensive parking.

Comment: Your comments about New Hampshire and economic development are right on. The traffic congestion on the highway today is real. A multi-strategy approach needs to happen. Massachusetts just floated a \$900 million bond for commuter rail. This BOS doesn't seem that much in light of that.

Response: The real cost of development should be evaluated by looking at financing mechanisms. BOS costs \$88 million. One half could be funded by the federal government, bring the cost down to \$44 million. This number would be shared by two states, bring the cost per state to \$22 million. If financed over 20 years the cost of BOS is not as daunting a figure.

Paul Nelson of Massachusetts EOT said participation at public meetings has shown how much more a benefit/need there is for transit in this corridor. Bill Cass of NHDOT said the study has fostered bi-state collaboration. Taking this forward, in NH I-93 is a high priority. As priorities align, there will be more opportunities for transit.

Question: How long does it take for a project to be built?

Response: A standard project, from concept to construction, takes approximately five to ten years. Broad community support is helpful in moving a project forward.

Question: Why not have the buses use the HOV lane?

Response: Trying to get buses in or out of HOV lanes is difficult.

Question: Could another lane be added to I-93 in Massachusetts?

Response: I-93 goes through Middlesex Fells so would be very difficult to widen as it would impact parklands and federal dollars aren't likely.

Question: Could you do a reversible lane?

Response: We looked at it and there are some impediments.

Question: Does the budget include the cost of purchasing trains or buses?

Response: No. The project budget includes all construction costs, reconditioning lanes and passing sidings.

Comment: Federal rules are getting tighter, so I don't think in 2030 the M&L would ever get federal funds.

Response: Today it probably wouldn't satisfy the New Starts funding criteria. To get federal dollars it would be important to be able to demonstrate good land use policy and a realistic financial plan.

Comment: We need to talk to our delegation now to get money for buses. If we don't do it now for 2009, we won't be able to go back for another 6 years.

Question: Is there anything you could use for support on the user end that would indicate to others? Is there anything we can do to help?

Response: It's fundamental. Let your elected leaders know this project is important.

Question: Will this project be competing with I-93/I-95 project?

Response: For state funds yes, but not on the federal level because it's funding source would be transit, not highway funds.

Question: Where does this project stack up as a Massachusetts priority?

Response: Once the recommendations of this study are complete, the projects will be prioritized as part of the existing planning processes in Massachusetts such as each metropolitan planning organization's Regional Transportation Plans and the MBTA's Program for Mass Transportation. Massachusetts will also continue to work closely with New Hampshire to coordinate these efforts.

Question: I'm a lifelong resident of Massachusetts. I've seen development, huge increase in traffic, and the demise of M&L. When did use of the M&L line stop?

Response: Passenger service ended in 1953; freight in the 1980s

Question: Commuter rail is an excellent solution. Is there any stipulation that says freight has to be allowed on line if there is federal money?

Response: No.