



Northern Tier Passenger Rail Study Working Group Meeting #4
Thursday, March 21, 2024, 1:00 PM
Held Virtually Via Zoom

Meeting Summary

The Northern Tier Passenger Rail Study Working Group met for the fourth and final time on March 21, 2024. At this meeting, the Study team shared an overview of the study's background, reviewed the study alternatives, outlined issues and opportunities to consider, presented draft recommended next steps and draft implementation plan, and garnered feedback. The meeting was also open to members of the public, who were given the opportunity to share comments and questions at the end of the meeting.

Meeting Notes

1. *Welcome, Ground Rules, and Agenda by Makaela Niles, MassDOT (Project Manager)*

All attendees are welcomed to the fourth and final Working Group meeting and are informed that the meeting is being recorded. Makaela Niles (MassDOT) introduces herself, thanks all participants, and explains the meeting notes and procedures including how to participate. She then introduces the agenda for the Working Group meeting, which includes an overview of the study, review of alternatives, presentation of issues and opportunities for consideration, draft recommended next steps and draft implementation plan, Working Group discussion, public comment, and finally next steps.

2. *Study Overview by Makaela Niles, MassDOT (Project Manager)*

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) explains the Study overview and process, which includes the following:

- Public participation
- Documenting past efforts
- Market analysis
- Physical, regulatory, and right-of-way (ROW) ownership
- Potential service plans and alternatives
- Alternatives evaluation and cost estimate
- Development of recommended next steps

The Study team presents the goals and objectives for the Study, which are to:

- Support economic development along the Northern Tier corridor
- Promote transportation equity
- Minimize the impacts on public health and the environment from transportation

3. *Study Alternatives Review by Anna M. Barry and Paul Nelson, HNTB*

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) reviews the two-phase alternatives development process. Phase 1 developed a “Lower Investment Alternative” and a “Higher Investment Alternative,” which were presented at the public workshop to obtain feedback. Phase 2 used that feedback to develop four additional alternatives for providing service along the corridor.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) opens with the Phase 1 alternatives. Alternative 1, *Lower Investment*, features five round-trip trains per day stopping at four stations (North Adams, Greenfield, Fitchburg, and North Station) and improvements to portions of the tracks and associated infrastructure. Alternative 2, *Higher Investment*, also features five trains per day and the same four stations, with a higher level of infrastructure improvements that would allow faster train speeds.

She then introduces the Phase 2 alternatives, which were developed based upon stakeholder feedback from Phase 1. All the Phase 2 alternatives build on Alternative 2, *Higher Investment*, and the faster service allowed by those track improvements. Alternative 3, *Electrified Service*, would feature electrified services via overhead catenary wire and stops at seven stations (North Adams, Greenfield, Athol, Fitchburg, Ayer, Porter, and North Station). Alternative 4, *Full Local Service*, would feature stops at eight stations (North Adams, Shelburne Falls, Greenfield, Athol, Gardner, Fitchburg, Porter, and North Station). Alternative 5, *Albany Extension*, would extend service to Albany, NY, serving seven stations (Albany and Schenectady in New York, North Adams, Greenfield, Fitchburg, Porter, and North Station). Alternative 6, *Northern Tier Rail Link*, would provide service to North Adams, Greenfield, Athol, and Fitchburg, and require passengers to transfer to the MBTA Commuter Rail’s Fitchburg Line for service to North Station.

Paul Nelson (HNTB) presents the evaluation criteria used to compare the six alternatives: service frequency, number of stations served, eastbound travel times and how they compare to driving, maximum train speeds, environmental impacts, passenger rail impacts, freight rail impacts, community/safety impacts (e.g., grade crossings), estimated annual ridership, capital cost per mile and capital cost per rider, operating and maintenance cost per rider, transportation cost savings for riding versus driving, annual reduction in vehicle miles travelled (VMT), and economic impacts from construction of the new service (e.g., track improvements, new stations, etc.). He explains the factors that affect each item (e.g., stopping patterns and estimated ridership) and how the total estimated cost for each alternative was determined. He reviews the total costs for the alternatives and explains the total capital cost and the total annual operations and maintenance costs. He then discusses the benefit-cost analysis (BCA). He states that the key takeaways are that all alternatives are estimated to provide connectivity, mobility, and choice, and are estimated to provide positive environmental and economic impacts. He notes that Alternatives 3 and 4 generate the highest ridership levels and the measurements associated with them, including transportation cost savings and VMT reduction.

4. *Issues and Opportunities by Anna M. Barry and Paul Nelson, HNTB*

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) states that the governance (who will oversee existing or new intercity passenger rail service within the Commonwealth) was examined by the Western Massachusetts Passenger Rail Commission, which recommends that current and new intercity passenger rail services should be developed and operated by MassDOT.

She discusses Compass Rail, a regional rail network initiative for east-west and north-south rail services in Massachusetts. She notes that this is intercity rail (not commuter rail) and is administered by MassDOT's Rail and Transit Division, which partners with Amtrak, CSX, and abutting states.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) discusses access considerations and notes that the host railroads and the passenger rail operator would need to consent for service to occur and to obtain federal funds. She also discusses the existing infrastructure, stating that there are many unknowns regarding how repairs or improvements to bridges, tunnels, etc., might affect the cost. Cost estimates include contingencies, but costs could still increase due to unknowns.

Paul Nelson (HNTB) discusses the current population projections and how population trends affect ridership projections. He states that population at the western end of the corridor is projected to decline while population at the central portion of the corridor is expected to increase modestly. He notes that pandemic-related changes in population and travel patterns could be further evaluated.

He discusses the intersection of housing and transportation, and what supporting infrastructure may be needed - such as impacts on schools, local businesses, and tourism opportunities. He then presents potential funding opportunities, including federal funding programs, state funding programs, and local funding and financing programs.

5. *Draft Recommended Next Steps, by Makaela Niles, MassDOT (Project Manager)*

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) presents the draft recommended next steps for the Study, which are to:

- Continue to improve understanding of travel demand along the Northern Tier corridor, corridor segments, and linkages to key regional destinations;
- Continue to advance planning efforts at the intersection of economic development needs and opportunities, including at potential station locations;
- Explore scheduled motor coach service to Northern Tier corridor destinations;
- Evaluate alternative phasing or implementation strategies;
- Evaluate express service between Fitchburg and Boston;
- Monitor freight use and trends in the corridor to explore needs/opportunities for public investment; and
- Develop strategies for improving rail connections within the corridor to meet study goals of supporting economic development, transportation equity, and minimizing impacts to public health and the environment.

6. *Draft Implementation Plan by Makaela Niles, MassDOT (Project Manager)*

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) introduces the draft implementation plan and the six-step project development process of the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) from planning through operation. She mentions that the Northern Tier Passenger Rail Study falls under the earliest stage of this implementation process (systems planning) and presents a sample implementation timeline.

7. *Working Group Discussion by Makaela Niles, MassDOT (Project Manager)*

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) asks for questions and comments from the Working Group. She reviews the protocol for asking questions and/or leaving comments.

Jackson Moore-Otto asks about Class 4 versus Class 5 track (i.e., speed categories) and why Class 4 seems to be the maximum considered for this project.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) responds that the study looked at reasonable increases in speed based on track conditions at this stage.

Kevin Lynch notes that Norfolk Southern is a part owner of Pan Am Southern and is one of the host railroads along the corridor.

Dan Rivera asks about the federal grants presented and what the monetary gap would be anticipated to be between the grant money likely to be awarded and the actual construction cost; and then asked how the federal grants will inform the project cost and decisions.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) responds that some efforts are yet to be undertaken before the project could consider applying for grants and that what grants are available will depend on the project timing as federal grants change over time.

Representative John Barrett expresses concern about the study's timeline and states that the process keeps adding items rather than reaching a final report that can advance to the next steps. He wants to see action and receive answers. He mentions the economy in the area he represents and expresses that rail, along with broadband, are ways to boost it.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) thanks Representative Barrett for sharing these comments and concerns and notes that the draft recommendations presented aim to advance this effort.

Senator Jo Comerford thanks the team for their work. She then asks about the exploration of funding and investing in this effort moving forward.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) responds that the funding sources shared in the presentation will be documented in the draft final report.

Senator Comerford then asks a follow-up question: Is MassDOT going to push forward in exploring those funding potentials?

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) responds that funding strategies will be explored as specific portions of the project are identified and realized.

Jackson Moore-Otto asks: Will actual cost assumptions be made public? To what extent has the project team been in conversation with the Rail Transformation Office of the MBTA? Will improvements be made to the Fitchburg to North Station segment of the line? Might the Fitchburg Line be electrified, and travel time speeded up?

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) mentions that the cost analysis will be included in the appendices to the final project study report, which will be available to the public.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) states that no improvements to the MBTA Fitchburg Line were considered for this study; however, it is assumed that by the time this project is underway, electrification of the Fitchburg Line will already have been completed. She mentions that there would need to be coordination with the MBTA.

Representative Natalie Blais states that it is her understanding that the study has been funded, but there is no more funding to do any more work on a study.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) notes that this study is looking at conceptual planning for the corridor and confirms that there is no additional funding for study at this time.

Representative Blais asks how a decision would be made as to what the best plan is to move forward and what that process looks like.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) states that, based on the feedback received and the analysis, Alternatives 3 and 4 (electrified service and full local service) might be the options that are advanced for further development.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) confirms that Alternatives 3 and 4 had the best measurements and metrics related to benefits and cost effectiveness. She mentions the project development, environmental, and governance processes, and notes that the alternatives would need to be reviewed in greater detail in preparation for any potential funding opportunities.

Representative Blais asks if the preferred alternative is something that the Commonwealth would need to address in order to determine whether or not to apply for available federal funds.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) mentions that some federal funding programs can support planning and that largely it is the Commonwealth's responsibility to determine the direction to take.

Representative Blais mentions governance and asks to clarify that MassDOT is the agency that would take on determining what the next steps are.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) states that MassDOT has the responsibility to administer the programs and executes the policy decisions of the legislature and the governor.

Representative Blais notes that the recent governance study said that MassDOT should be the one to oversee rail development in Western Massachusetts and asks for clarification on how decisions will be made.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) mentions that state and federal planning processes require documented community input, as well as measurements and metrics that show benefits and costs, to demonstrate that there is a consensus behind the choice made.

Representative Blais mentions that MassDOT would be the organization to oversee the analysis and determine what the next best step forward is before applying for federal funds and notes the benefit-cost analysis. She also asks about the benefit-cost for West-East Rail.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) states that different grant programs have different criteria and notes that some of the grant programs for discrete types of improvements might be able to be funded.

Representative Blais states that there is a great deal of excitement for this project and for the economic development it could bring and encourages MassDOT to move forward quickly.

Representative Barrett comments that the funding issues have been brought up in previous Working Group meetings and emphasizes that the study is entering its third year and expresses frustration that things have to start to happen.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) thanks him for his comments and states that the team looked at funding at the federal, state, and local levels that, in combination, could address either in part or all of the development of the process. She notes that some of the funding sources address planning, others address construction, and some address both planning and construction.

Representative Barrett points to funding available for passenger train service in Western MA and states that some of it should begin to be used for this project.

8. Public Comment by Makaela Niles, MassDOT (Project Manager)

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) opens the floor to questions and comments from the general public.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) reads a question from Andrew who asks, if the Albany extension were implemented, would New York State contribute to the construction costs?

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) responds that for intercity passenger rail projects, states would need to be engaged and agree to the service, as well as any associated costs.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) reads a question from Frank who asks, has any consideration been given to adding a multi-use path along the rail line?

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) states that the focus of the effort was the implementation of passenger rail service, so the potential for multi-use paths were not addressed in the study but that does not preclude the possibility of it in the future. She notes that anything within the right-of-way has to be agreed upon by the owners as well as any partner states there may be.

Andy Hogeland thanks the team and asks about the economic benefits of the project and whether more detailed work, such as broadening the scope of topics, will be done as part of this or a future effort.

Paul Nelson (HNTB) states that the primary economic benefits examined were those due to construction and the travel benefits tied to having people travel on the rail service, and the use of benefit-cost analysis guidance. He mentions that other potential benefits could be looked at in more detail.

Price Armstrong (Cambridge Systematics) adds that the benefit-cost analysis is one of the key frameworks for pursuing federal funding and mentions qualitative and alternative lenses for looking at induced economic development.

Jacob Harrington (UMass Donahue Institute) adds that some benefits are uncertain and are difficult to quantify because of changes that can happen in the years after a service begins.

Carl Fowler states that the terminus of the service should be Williamstown due to its tourism destinations and academic institutions. He also states that connectivity from Vermont should be considered.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) notes that the legislation for this study directed MassDOT to conduct a feasibility study of rail access between Boston to North Adams, and that is the background on why North Adams was considered to be the terminus for the majority of the alternatives.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) reads a question from Andrew who asks, does the Albany extension ridership assumption factor in visitors who might come to the Berkshires from Albany and New York City?

Paul Nelson (HNTB) states that the ridership numbers took multiple factors into account such as population and employment data, and trip data within the corridor around the station locations. He adds for Carl that Williamstown was incorporated within the catchment area that was examined and that a variant that includes a Williamstown station and its potential benefits could be looked at. He states that while trips in New York within proximity to the borders of Massachusetts were incorporated, New York City ridership was not captured.

Joe Kurland states that he is eager for this project to be implemented and that the full local service (Alternative 4) including Williamstown is important.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) reads a question from Paula who asks, what will it take for the Northern Tier to be added to the Compass Rail schematic?

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) states that Compass Rail is an evolving effort and as the Northern Tier progresses it may be added to the process.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) reads a question from Jim who asks, what would the ridership have to be to get the benefit-cost ratio to 1?

Paul Nelson (HNTB) states that ridership would have to be significantly higher. He adds that there are opportunities to grow awareness and interest in train travel within the corridor and that varying the frequency, coverage area, associated costs, and other elements could be a place to start to achieve a higher benefit-cost ratio.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) reads a question from Dave who asks, why contract with Amtrak when the state has a dedicated Commuter Rail workforce?

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) mentions the two different types of passenger rail services (intercity and commuter rail) and explains that commuter rail involves high frequency, peak-oriented service and intercity service has fewer stops, greater distances between stops, and less frequency compared to commuter rail service. She notes that Amtrak is the intercity rail operator in the U.S. and their right of access to rights-of-way.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) reads a question from Ben who asks how the business community has been engaged, and mentions that between workforce, tourism, and hybrid work, it seems business opportunities go beyond what a pure number analysis can represent.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) states that the impacts on businesses were examined and notes the participation through the study's Working Group.

Paul Nelson (HNTB) adds that the potential impact of relocation and hybrid work are factors that would be recommended to be examined.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) thanks everyone for sharing their comments, questions, and concerns.

9. Next Steps by Makaela Niles, MassDOT (Project Manager)

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) informs the meeting attendees of the public meeting being held next week and invites everyone to register and attend. She states that following that meeting, a draft final report will be released and made available for public comment, then finalized in a

final report. She thanks attendees for their participation and encourages visiting the study website to sign up for study updates and to share additional feedback, comments, and questions. She mentions that the materials from this meeting will be made available on the Study website. Makaela Niles (MassDOT) wishes everyone a good rest of their day and concludes the meeting.

Northern Tier Passenger Rail Study Working Group Meeting #4 Attendees

MassDOT/Study Team:

- Makaela Niles - MassDOT
- Anna M. Barry - HNTB
- Paul Nelson - HNTB
- Price Armstrong - Cambridge Systematics
- Jacob Harrington - UMass Donahue Institute
- Sofia Clark – HDR | City Point Partners

Working Group Members & Alternates:

1. Elizabeth Quigley – Office of Congressman Richard Neal
2. Jo Comerford - State Senator
3. John Barrett - State Representative
4. Natalie Blais - State Representative
5. Linda Dunlavy - Franklin Regional Council of Governments
6. Robert Malnati - Berkshire Regional Transit Authority
7. Thomas Matuszko - Berkshire Regional Planning Commission
8. Bruno Fisher – Montachusett Regional Transit Authority
9. Marco Turra – CSX Transportation
10. Kevin Lynch - Norfolk Southern Railway
11. Jackson Moore-Otto - TransitMatters
12. Dan Rivera - MassDevelopment
13. Roy Nascimento - North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce

Public Attendees:

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Andreas Aeppli | 9. Michael Fesen |
| 2. Alexander Bergstrand | 10. Andrew Fitch |
| 3. Gus Bickford | 11. Carl Fowler |
| 4. Amy Cahillane | 12. Jacquelyn Goddard |
| 5. Frank Citino | 13. Tyler Godin |
| 6. Elena Cohen | 14. Thomas Green |
| 7. Paula Consolini | 15. Ryan Griffis |
| 8. Paige Dolinski | 16. Ben Heckscher |

17. Andy Hogeland
18. George Kahale
19. Joe Kurland
20. Benjamin Lamb
21. Jerry Lund
22. Jim Mahon
23. Linda Maloney
24. Grego Mori
25. Mary Ann Nessel
26. Dawn Nims
27. Walker Powell
28. Kali Puppolo
29. Leo Quigley
30. Sidney Rothstein
31. Richard Rudolph
32. Eric Smith
33. Patrick Snyder
34. Dave Stevenson
35. Susan Templeton
36. Jenny Wright