



Northern Tier Passenger Rail Study Working Group Meeting #3
Thursday, October 19, 2023, 1:00 PM
Held Virtually Via Zoom

Meeting Summary

The Northern Tier Passenger Rail Study Working Group workshop met for the third time on October 19, 2023. At this meeting, the Study team shared an overview of the study's background, reviewed the public workshop, presented the development and evaluation of the Phase 2 alternatives, and garnered feedback.

Meeting Notes

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

All attendees are welcomed to the meeting and 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 reviews the agenda for the meeting.

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. *Public Workshop Review by Anna M. Barry and Paul Nelson, HNTB*

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) reviews the two-phase alternatives development process. Phase 1 includes two initial alternatives: a lower investment option and a higher investment option, each with a one-seat ride from North Adams to Boston North Station, four stations, and five trains per day. The initial alternatives assume the accommodation of commuter schedules and freight trains, diesel trains with Amtrak-type equipment, and no modification or investment in MBTA infrastructure. The level of investment was the main differentiator between the two alternatives, as the higher investment includes more track infrastructure improvements.

An evaluation of the two initial alternatives found that the higher investment level allowed for travel time reduction of more than one hour both eastbound and westbound compared to the lower investment level. Anna M. Barry (HNTB) explains the relationship between ridership, cost, travel time, and associated economic and environmental benefits and impacts.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) reviews the feedback received during and following the public workshop which helped inform the development of the Phase 2 Alternatives.

The Study team was asked to:

- Consider additional stops
- Evaluate a connection to Albany
- Consider seasonal attractors
- Consider potential upgrades to support higher speeds

Comments and questions related to ridership projections and cost estimation were also received.

Paul Nelson (HNTB) explains that the initial ridership estimation process for the Phase 1 evaluation was a three-step process based on StreetLight Data origin-destination trips, which were applied to observed MBTA Commuter Rail boardings. Then, using a travel time comparison to account for the trip distance, the ridership was estimated. He then reviews the updated, four-step ridership estimation process including the incorporation of travel time by rail compared to driving. Daily trip origins by corridor segment from 2019 StreetLight Data are presented and catchment areas around stations are also described as a factor in estimating ridership.

The cost estimation process is reviewed. Cost categories include construction cost, acquisition of real estate for the right of way, a civil system contingency at 0% design, vehicle or train costs, escalation for future costs, and engineering and permitting.

The Northern Tier Passenger Rail Study is at a pre-design stage, therefore contingency costs account for unknown but expected elements of the project. The cost estimates are based on material, equipment, and labor costs from recent railroad construction projects in Massachusetts and surrounding states. The Study team refined the cost of track components, incorporated a credit for recycled rail and materials, and updated the rolling stock estimates. Station estimates reflect station accessibility features.

4. *Phase 2 Alternatives Development and Evaluation by Anna M. Barry and Paul Nelson, HNTB*

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) explains that, based on input, four additional service alternatives were developed as part of Phase 2. Each is built upon the higher level of investment from the Phase 1 alternatives.

- Alternative 3 – Electrified Service – Includes an overhead catenary system and associated rolling stock. The cost of electrifying the rail service is discussed. A new double track in Charlemont is required for freight service to continue. Tracks are to be upgraded from Class 3 to Class 4. Electrification is overhead. Crossings need upgrades. Some bridge rehabilitation is necessary. Signal replacement and Positive Train Control are proposed improvements. Stations at Athol, Ayer, and Porter Square, Cambridge are added. A layover facility in North Adams is also proposed.
- Alternative 4 – Full Local Service – The cost of full local service to include more stations in Shelburne Falls, Athol, Gardner and Porter Square, Cambridge is discussed. New double track is proposed in Buckland. Tracks are proposed to be upgraded from Class 3 to Class 4. Upgrades to crossings and bridge rehabilitation are also proposed. Signal replacement and Positive Train Control is anticipated. A layover facility in North Adams is also proposed.
- Alternative 5 – Albany Extension – From North Adams, service is extended to Schenectady and Albany. Double track is proposed in Charlemont, Stillwater, NY and Clifton Park, NY. Additional improvements proposed include grade crossing upgrades, bridge rehabilitation, signal replacement and Positive Train Control implementation. North Adams layover is not included, as facilities in Albany are assumed to be utilized.
- Alternative 6 – Northern Tier Rail Link – Includes a connection in Fitchburg from the MBTA Commute Rail to Northern Rail Tier train service. Station stops added include Athol. Tracks are to be upgraded from Class 3 to Class 4. Crossing need upgrades. Some bridge rehabilitation is necessary. Signal replacement and Positive Train Control are implemented. North Adams is proposed to have a layover.

Total Project Cost per Route Mile is discussed for Alternatives 1 through 6. Project construction costs for the Hartford Line and South Coast Rail are presented for comparison purposes.

Paul Nelson (HNTB) explains that ridership is related to travel time and a reduction in travel time increases ridership. Alternative 3 (Electrified Service) and Alternative 4 (Full Local Service) generate the highest ridership.

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

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

Senator Jo Comerford thanks the Study team for the presentation. She also expresses excitement about the local stops and appreciation for the combination of climate readiness. She mentions the public meeting being held the following week and the importance of building public awareness.

Representative John Barrett requests information on the cost of the North Adams loading station.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) replies by estimating \$5 million to \$6 million, which developing level boarding for accessibility. Anna Barry notes that the highest cost alternative that includes electrification is approximately \$3 billion, and the lower cost alternative is approximately \$1.5 billion.

Robert Malnati requests clarification of the ridership estimates presented.

Paul Nelson (HNTB) explains that the ridership numbers presented accounted for the range of ridership estimated for the six alternatives studied. Alternatives 3 and 4 are represented by the higher end of the ridership estimate. The lower ridership estimate represents Alternative 6, which also has the longest travel time.

Robert Malnati asks about whether the Lake Shore Limited service was taken into consideration.

Paul Nelson (HNTB) says that ridership for the Lake Shore Limited was also studied and mentions that the Downeaster ridership was studied for comparison for travel beyond the metropolitan Boston area to identify potential ridership in places like Greenfield and intermediate stations like Athol.

Linda Dunlavy requests that the ridership in the presentation be clarified before the public meeting.

Paul Nelson (HNTB) says that the range can be provided to help people understand how the numbers relate to each other.

Representative Natalie Blais thanks the Study team for the analysis and asks about whether the cost estimates were based on contracting out to a private entity or based on using the railroad to do the work.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) says that cost estimates were based on recent rail construction projects and that often the railroad will use its own forces if they have them.

Representative Natalie Blais asks about the rolling stock included in the cost estimates, including who would own the rolling stock, would it include purchasing new vehicles, and how those cost estimates were developed around vehicles.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) says the cost estimates include the capital cost of purchasing equipment and that the assumption is that Amtrak would be the operator. She notes that the Commonwealth, as the sponsor of the service, would be responsible for the various capital costs and mentions that, in order to look at the true capital cost of the project, it was treated as if the Commonwealth was buying the equipment.

Andreas Aeppli (Cambridge Systematics) states that the cost is based on the current Amtrak procurement for corridor trains.

Representative Natalie Blais inquires about whether the assumption is that this would be an intercity rail service.

Andreas Aeppli (Cambridge Systematics) says that intercity rolling stock would be used, as opposed to commuter equipment, and Anna M. Barry (HNTB) states that the service is to be considered intercity rail.

Representative Natalie Blais asks about whether the cost estimates included the full construction of high-level platforms and whether these could be phased.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) explains that the Study includes the cost of full, high-level platforms and assumed a retractable platform edge in order to include the full cost of accessibility, while recognizing that phasing is possible.

Representative Natalie Blais says it might be helpful to understand the cost of mini high platforms would be and inquires about assumptions on electrification east of Fitchburg. Representative Natalie Blais also asks about an estimated timeline for Northern Tier.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) says that a construction estimate was used and the impact funding has on the timeline. She also explains that electrification is a big endeavor and that the Study assumes that the service east of Fitchburg is electrified, as the Study did not want to burden the Northern Tier project with the cost of electrifying east of Fitchburg. Anna M. Barry (HNTB) mentions that electrification could take place in phases and that dual mode rolling stock could potentially be utilized.

Representative Natalie Blais asks about the proposed track reconfiguration west of Shelburne Falls.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) states that double track allows for freight and passenger trains to pass each other and that, because the railroad is largely single track now, additional track needs to be provided for the trains to pass each other and to accommodate the schedule.

Paul Nelson (HNTB) adds that it is assumed that double track could be added within the existing right-of-way.

Representative Natalie Blais asks about the number of freight trains currently operating along the corridor.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) says that approximately 40 trains per week and Andreas Aeppli (Cambridge Systematics) adds that volumes between Fitchburg and Greenfield differ from volumes west of Greenfield.

Representative Natalie Blais suggests that ridership projections be included on the Alternative slides and asks if the study has considered a mix of straight-through westbound trips and some that connect to the MBTA Fitchburg Line.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) says that the Study has not considered that alternative.

Representative Natalie Blais requests more information on induced economic development.

Paul Nelson (HNTB) states that estimated job creation and value added from the capital construction costs and mentions that the benefit-cost analysis will include other economic benefits such as increased real estate values. He also explains the relationship between capital costs, community benefits, and job creation.

Senator Jo Comerford asks what relationship Keolis would have with the Northern Tier Rail service east of Fitchburg.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) says that service alternatives were developed to avoid impacting the MBTA Commuter Rail trains operated by Keolis.

Senator Jo Comerford mentions the benefit of connecting to trains in the east and suggests that for the public meeting, information on rough timelines of implementation, climate, and economic impacts for all of Massachusetts could be useful to present. Senator Jo Comerford asks about public outreach strategies for the public meeting that could be used and shared.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) states that the next task of the study will address implementation, funding opportunities, and timelines. She also asks for participants to share the information on the website with the public and states that all are invited to attend the public meeting scheduled for Thursday, October 26, 2023 at 6:00 PM. She shares that registration information and a flyer are available, as well as social media posting.

Representative John Barrett inquires about when the meeting materials may be available for viewing.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) that the presentation will be posted to the study website once it is made accessible and is anticipated to be posted in advance of the public meeting.

Representative Natalie Blais asks if the presentation will be sent to the Working Group.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) confirms and says that the process will be expedited to allow enough time for review of the materials in advance of the public meeting.

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

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) opens the discussion up to members of the public in attendance for public comment and reminds the public that additional questions and comments can be shared on the study website.

Barbara Alexander asks if the alternatives could be ranked and presented from the simplest and cheapest alternative to be implemented and built to the most complex and expensive alternative. She asks about the timeline and feels the public would also be well served to know the timeline of implementation of the alternatives.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) states that the next steps implementation and timeline will be discussed in the next task. She reads comments from Shaun and Eric related to the inclusion of Athol as a proposed stop.

Richard Rudolf would like to know and feels the public needs to know the timeline. He states that Alternative 6 with a stop in Fitchburg with an expectation for riders to then use MBTA service is inconvenient and will take more time.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) recognizes Richard's comment and agrees that the need for a connection reduces the estimated ridership for Alternative 6, but that in a planning study an array of alternatives are examined.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) reads a question from Fay who asks about travel times from Athol to North Station and whether people who live in Athol may be willing to commute to a Greenfield station if there is no station in Athol.

Paul Nelson (HNTB) discusses testing the impact of stations on ridership, and explains that mobility benefits increase as stations increase.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) reads a comment from Fay related to ridership equity for students and individuals dependent on public transportation from a financial perspective.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) reads a question from Trevor who asks what is meant by full local service.

Anna M. Barry (HNTB) responds by explaining the full local service features the highest number of stations along the corridor and includes North Adams, Shelburne Falls, Greenfield, Athol, Gardner, and Fitchburg.

Linda Dunlavy asks if the ridership and cost methodologies changed when re-evaluating Alternative 1 and 2.

Paul Nelson (HNTB) states that the cost of equipment changed, and ridership increased.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) reads a comment from Paula who expresses gratitude for the work on the project and an interest in the potential for phasing.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) states that this will be included as part of the next steps of the Study.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) reads a question from Jared about considering additional ridership from transfers for north and south lines as a source of ridership.

Paul Nelson (HNTB) states that the model doesn't count on transfers by rail outside of the catchment areas. Andreas Aeppli (Cambridge Systematics) states that other markets were not studied, including the New York market.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) reads a comment from Artie that existing track and rail lines should be used and favors Alternative 5 and electrification for its effect on climate change. She also reads a question from Barbara who asks about whether the unreliability of the Lake Shore Limited schedule is reflected in the ridership estimates.

Andreas Aeppli (Cambridge Systematics) says that it was not taken into account from an analysis standpoint.

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) reads a question from Leo who asks how seasonal draws were reflected in the analysis.

Paul Nelson (HNTB) states that ridership was analyzed based on annual data and mentions that seasonal draws add peaks and valleys to the ridership.

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

Makaela Niles (MassDOT) thanks the Working Group and members of the public for attending and sharing comments and questions and encourages attendees to visit the website to submit additional comments or questions or sign up for updates. The materials from this meeting will be made available on the Study website.

Northern Tier Passenger Rail Study Meeting #3 Attendees

MassDOT/Study Team:

- Makaela Niles – MassDOT
- Anna M. Barry – HNTB
- Paul Nelson – HNTB
- Sara Stoja – HNTB
- Andreas Aeppli – Cambridge Systematics
- Julie Callahan – City Point Partners

Working Group Members & Alternates:

1. Liz Quigley – Office of Congressman Richard Neal
2. Jo Comerford – State Senator
3. Natalie Blais – State Representative
4. John Barrett – State Representative
5. Bruno Fisher – Montachusett Regional Transit Authority
6. Glenn Eaton – Montachusett Regional Planning Commission
7. Linda Dunlavy – Franklin Regional Council of Governments
8. Marco Turra – CSX Transportation
9. Robert Malnati – Berkshire Regional Transit Authority
10. Thomas Matuszko – Berkshire Regional Planning Commission
11. Roy Nascimento - North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce

Public Attendees:

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| 1. Amy Cahillane | 19. Jared Cowing |
| 2. Ana Devlin Gauthier | 20. Jessye Deane |
| 3. Andy Hogeland | 21. Juno Pelczar |
| 4. Antoinette Cariddi | 22. Kali Puppolo |
| 5. Artie Carpenter | 23. Kate Richardson |
| 6. Barbara Alexander | 24. Kiara White |
| 7. Ben Heckscher | 25. Leo Quigley |
| 8. Beth Giannini | 26. Mallory Sullivan |
| 9. Brad Harris | 27. Mariah Kurtz |
| 10. Brian Parkinson | 28. Mark Anders |
| 11. Charlotte Minsky | 29. Paula Consolini |
| 12. Chris Klem, MassDOT | 30. Richard Rudolph |
| 13. Clete Kus | 31. Shaun Suhoski |
| 14. Dawn Nims | 32. Soren Henry |
| 15. Donna Riggs | 33. Susan Templeton |
| 16. Eric Smith | 34. Travis Condon |
| 17. Fay Hsieh-Lewis | 35. Trevor Beauregard |
| 18. George Kahale | 36. Walker Powell |