

6. Next Steps and Recommendations

The East – West Passenger Rail Study is a substantial step forward in realizing the potential for enhanced service within the corridor. The following areas have been identified as next steps to continue advancing the conceptual planning phase for East-West Passenger Rail.

During this time of fiscal uncertainty, MassDOT will review what federal transportation planning grants may be available to support some of the work described in this chapter. These next steps are recommended to gather additional information that could inform the development of an East-West Passenger Rail corridor beyond the analysis contained in this study.

Further Discussion of CSX Requirements

Simply put, CSX policy regarding accommodation of passenger rail service on its right-of-way adds significant cost and complexity because it favors complete separation of the passenger operations from its own tracks whenever possible. The estimated additional capital cost for complying with CSX's design criteria is approximately \$1.5 billion.

Separate track with 30-foot spacing from the existing freight rail is required for any passenger rail operation where train speeds exceed 90 mph. Where shared-track operations occur, CSX requires new and upgraded infrastructure to meet its latest engineering-related policies concerning weight and clearance requirements as well as design standards. Track restoration elements found in the East-West Study assumed wider track centers (distance between two tracks) than historically found along the route as well as replacement of undergrade bridges to comply with the CSX guidance.

This investment would allow passenger and freight to operate with less risk of operational interference but may not necessarily be needed for the speeds described in the various Alternatives or for safe, well-coordinated operations.

Therefore, MassDOT will:

- Continue discussions with CSX to ascertain the basis for their policies and requirements related to shared operations with passenger service and whether their support for an East-West passenger service is possible and, if not, what other options exist;
- Ask CSX to cooperate in additional analysis such as rail capacity modeling and right-of-way condition;
- Seek to conduct a life-cycle cost analysis, if possible, to determine the full spectrum of costs associated with greater control over the right-of-way; and
- As commenters such as the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) and the Sierra Club have suggested, a phased approach may be worth considering and discussing with CSX. Phasing has proved useful with other projects in Massachusetts -- most recently the South Coast Rail project. A phased approach could focus on specific improvements that offer benefits such as safety and increased reliability or could address infrastructure in a particular segment. Whether a pilot service would be worthwhile is uncertain given the current operational impediments, but it may be explored as part of a phased approach and could also include working with Amtrak on any plans for service to Albany.

This step is consistent with the suggestions of several Advisory Committee members as well as the written comments of the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC).

More Detailed Study of Economic and Community Benefits and Impacts

Several stakeholders have correctly noted this study does not fully capture some of the potentially transformative economic and demographic impacts/benefits of East-West Passenger Rail, i.e., an exploration of long-term demographic and growth patterns for western Massachusetts and how an East-West rail corridor could be one of several focused policies to promote affordable living and economic development in western Massachusetts. This study did not include these important issues because such travel and demographic changes are not captured by a standard transportation analysis, but MassDOT agrees that such an analysis is a critical next step to more fully understand the benefits of East-West rail.

Exploring this issue would require investigation of current and prospective factors affecting regional growth. Such a study would begin with a literature review and an examination of case studies of similar projects elsewhere. The inquiry could then focus on what economic and demographic results were achieved and what other changes – apart from new rail service – were significant contributors to the results.

MassDOT has not yet identified either the state or federal funding to support such a study, though it will develop a rough scope and accompanying cost estimate and then work to identify what federal transportation planning grants may be available to support the work. If funded, MassDOT would look for significant participation in developing the study parameters and assumptions by the Metropolitan Planning Organizations and businesses. That input would be particularly important to assessing factors other than improved train service. These might include changes in regional land use or housing policy.

Several commenters also noted that this study does not consider the long-term travel impacts of the current pandemic – particularly the possibility that remote working will become more common and that for many people the home-work distance will be lengthened.

MassDOT will be evaluating how travel patterns have changed and may continue to change and apply this evaluation in a variety of contexts, not only to the demand for passenger rail but also to issues such as its effects on congestion in greater Boston and potential increases in off-peak travel demand. A new travel option along the East-West corridor could be one of the scenarios examined as part of that broader inquiry.

These analyses may also be useful in determining whether phasing development of the corridor could provide a more viable path forward. For example, because roughly 62% of ridership is generated between Springfield and Boston, this segment may be a worthwhile starting point. While phasing is not likely to be a simple proposition, it could offer an opportunity to respond to one of the most prevalent themes among the commenters, namely an interest in change sooner rather than later.

Understand the Governance Options for Expanded Passenger Rail in Western Massachusetts

There are two main types of passenger rail service operating in the United States: commuter rail and intercity rail. Both types have very different operating characteristics, markets, and funding sources. There is currently no Massachusetts entity with the authority and the capacity to provide either type to the extent that has been analyzed in this study.

MassDOT is not a railroad and does not have the capacity to assume the responsibilities of one. It is not empowered or able to operate either commuter or intercity rail services.

The MBTA is currently the only commuter rail agency in the Commonwealth. Its service district, established by statute, extends no further west than Worcester. As with all commuter rail operations, the focus is on the peak-hour service aimed at commuters, with a majority of riders spending one hour or less on the train.

Amtrak, the nation's intercity passenger railroad, is the only railroad with the right to access rights-of-way owned by freight railroads, although the freight railroad can, and does, demand that Amtrak comply with certain terms as a condition of access. Intercity trips tend to be less focused on peak hours, are typically longer than one hour, and use more comfortable equipment that feature more spacious seating and often a café cart. Amtrak is a national corporation subsidized by the federal government through annual appropriations. MassDOT contracts with Amtrak to provide service -- but MassDOT does not oversee or manage the operations.

MassDOT does not have the capacity to operate as a railroad or to manage rail operations, and the MBTA is limited to operations within its legislatively-mandated service area. Given these limitations, a new public governance structure would be needed to support and direct operation of any of the three Final Alternatives, as well as any other non-pilot, permanent passenger rail services in western Massachusetts. These limitations would also be an issue for other passenger rail services within the Commonwealth outside the MBTA's service district. A new passenger rail governance structure would also be necessary if the Valley Flyer pilot and proposed Berkshire Flyer pilot serviced were successful and made permanent.

While the Legislature must ultimately decide how to best address the issue of governance for passenger rail in western Massachusetts, MassDOT would be happy to help advance the public debate and frame the legislative options by convening key elected stakeholders to discuss the legal and policy implications of different governance structures. MassDOT will rely on the input from these stakeholders to scope and develop a white paper to identify options for a governance structure for passenger rail outside the MBTA service district. This white paper could also form the basis of a legislative proposal. This collaboration with legislators will help ensure that policy goals are met and there is a viable mechanism to address governance for passenger rail within the Commonwealth.

While the exact form and substance of the white paper's scope will be determined in consultation with these elected stakeholders, MassDOT expects the work to consider issues such as the following:

- Dispatching all trains and/or coordinating with dispatch operations of other railroads (Figure 6-1).

Figure 6-1 – Eastbound CSX Freight Train Departing Pittsfield (Credit: D. Hoover)



- Legal/regulatory, operational, and financial characteristics of intercity and commuter rail service
- Structure and capacity of public entity to:
 - Evaluate and develop information about options
 - Develop funding and financing strategy, including fare policy
 - Provide management and oversight during
 - a. Construction
 - b. Operation
- Powers and authority of passenger rail entity, including:
 - Legal ability to provide or contract for commuter rail and/or intercity service
 - Technical capacity to provide or contract for commuter rail and or intercity service
 - Eligibility to receive and manage federal and other funds
 - Liability limitations and risks
 - Establishing balance between operating independence and public control
- Life-cycle costs of acquiring and supporting public interest in the right-of-way and related assets
- Funding sources and financing methods
 - Development through construction
 - Operations (including any subsidy required for the assumed fare policy)
 - Maintenance and capital renewal
- Scope of functions to be undertaken by an operating railroad, including:
 - Maintenance of the right-of-way, including stations and layover areas
 - Safety and regulatory compliance

- Securing and maintaining equipment, including locomotives and coaches
- Development of service plan and terms under which schedule can be altered
- Providing security
- Handling ticket sales and fare collection, engaging, and directing personnel
- Operating trains safely and on schedule

Evaluation of Funding Sources and Strategies

The East – West Passenger Rail project is a large and complex project that would require large capital investments as well as ongoing operations and maintenance funding, likely necessitating a combination of many different funding sources and strategies. MassDOT will coordinate efforts with state and federal elected officials and other key stakeholders to evaluate and identify potential funding sources. Project phasing, as discussed earlier, can also be evaluated in context with funding opportunities.

A major impediment to federal funding is the current methodology used by the U.S. Department of Transportation to conduct the benefit-cost analysis. Because the federal methodology considers only a limited range of benefits, the Commonwealth could not obtain any federal funding for South Coast Rail and likely would not qualify for federal funding for East-West Rail. MassDOT will work with the Congressional delegation and other key stakeholders to advocate for changes to the federal benefit-cost analysis method to better capture all of the potential benefits of investment in passenger rail.

MassDOT will also work with elected officials and key stakeholders to catalogue existing and potential federal funding sources, an effort that will depend in part on the findings from the governance white paper with respect to what entity could be the recipient of such funding.