

## 2. Introduction

### 2.1. Study Rationale

Community leaders, transportation stakeholders, and members of the public have expressed a desire for an enhanced passenger rail link among communities in western Massachusetts, central Massachusetts, and the Boston area. This desire is the result of a lack of robust, multi-modal transportation options, which makes Massachusetts communities west of Worcester reliant on motor vehicle travel via highways that are frequently congested east of Worcester. This is especially true of the highway network in eastern Massachusetts, which can represent a significant barrier to travel from the western part of the Commonwealth.

In response to these issues and concerns, the 2018 *Massachusetts State Rail Plan* included a recommendation for evaluation of a “Western Massachusetts to Boston Passenger Rail Service Study.” The East – West Passenger Rail Study represents the implementation of that recommendation.

Passenger rail service among the communities and attractions of western, central, and eastern Massachusetts could provide greater connectivity across the Commonwealth, enhance mobility, and create new economic development opportunities.

The East-West Passenger Rail Study:

- Identifies the corridors that have the potential to create new passenger rail connections among the study communities: Pittsfield, Springfield, Worcester, Boston, and intermediate communities.
- Assesses the geographic, infrastructure, and demographic conditions in the East – West rail corridor.

- Evaluates potential improvement alternatives for enhancing transportation connections among western, central, and eastern Massachusetts.
- Presents the findings of the analysis, including the projected benefits, costs, and impacts of the improvement alternatives.
- Was guided by an Advisory Committee review and comments.
- Identifies potential Next Steps for consideration to advance a project.

A robust transportation system, with a range of modal choices for residents, businesses, and visitors, is essential to creating and sustaining economic growth in the 21st century. Passenger rail service, when thoughtfully planned and implemented with meaningful levels of service, can be an important component of a robust multimodal transportation system that both supports and stimulates development.

Expansion of modal options in the East-West Rail Corridor would enhance mobility and connectivity for Corridor communities, and enable them to grow and prosper. Improved connectivity among job centers and better mobility for potential workers could expand employment opportunities for workers and the talent pool available to employers by better linking the western, central, and eastern regions of the Commonwealth with each other and with a broader travel market, including the New York metropolitan area.

Massachusetts has a comprehensive railroad network with the potential to provide passenger rail connections throughout the Commonwealth. The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) has undertaken efforts to restore and/or enhance Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) commuter rail

service to Boston, to “gateway” cities<sup>1</sup> and suburban communities throughout eastern Massachusetts. MassDOT has implemented significant improvements to service frequency and speed for the MBTA Framingham/Worcester and Fitchburg Commuter Rail Lines, and continues to advance restoration of passenger rail service to Fall River and New Bedford through the South Coast Rail project.

At the same time, Springfield has benefited from regional intercity passenger rail improvements, including the CTrail/Hartford Line and Knowledge Corridor projects. Nevertheless, passenger rail connections from Springfield and Pittsfield to central and eastern Massachusetts remain limited to Amtrak’s Lake Shore Limited, which provides one daily round trip train between Boston and Chicago.

MassDOT is undertaking the East-West Passenger Rail Study to build upon these and other recent transportation system initiatives; to better understand the travel demand and needs in the Pittsfield – Springfield – Worcester – Boston corridor; and to develop strategies for improving access and enhancing economic and other opportunities for residents, businesses, and visitors in the Commonwealth. The outcome of this study will be a clear assessment of the conceptual costs and impacts of enhanced rail service in the corridor, and a viable plan for providing improved access.

Throughout the course of the study, a robust civic engagement process has involved residents, businesses, elected officials, and other key stakeholders in the study. This process entailed public meetings, Study Advisory Committee meetings, briefings of business and

community groups, and on-demand information provided through a project website.

## 2.2. Study Goals

Building upon this study context and rationale, MassDOT worked with the Advisory Group, project stakeholders, and the public to identify the following project goals:

- Provide better **transportation options** to and from Western Massachusetts
- Support **economic development** throughout the East – West rail corridor
- Improve the attractiveness of Western Massachusetts as **an affordable place to live**
- Reduce the number of **automobile trips** along the corridor
- Reduce **greenhouse gas emissions** and **air quality impacts** from transportation

In developing and evaluating the study’s alternatives, the improved transportation and mobility benefits achieved relative to these goals must be balanced against project costs and impacts. The major impact and cost elements to be considered include:

- Extent and severity of environmental and community impacts
- Potential impacts to rail-based freight and MBTA Commuter Rail operations
- Capital costs and operations and maintenance costs

These project goals and impact considerations have shaped the development of the study’s alternatives, as well as the evaluation

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<sup>1</sup> Massachusetts gateway cities are midsize cities facing socio-economic challenges that create obstacles to realizing their full potential. Gateway cities in the East – West corridor include Pittsfield, Springfield, and Worcester.

criteria that have been used in the Alternatives Analysis, discussed in Section 4.

### 2.3. Study Corridor

Implementation of an East – West passenger rail service requires a continuous, linear corridor that passes through the communities to be served. Without a continuous corridor, it would be impossible for trains to operate between stations. It is also important that the corridor provide an alignment that is straight enough to achieve speeds required for competitive passenger rail service, and wide enough to accommodate the railroad infrastructure needed to provide service.

The definition of the East – West rail corridor begins with identifying the communities to be served. The East – West Passenger Rail Study is intended to evaluate opportunities for providing passenger rail service among Pittsfield, Springfield, Worcester, and Boston, with the potential for service to intermediate communities.

An East – West rail corridor connecting these communities requires:

- A continuous corridor that can accommodate a railroad alignment with connections to the service communities
- Rail infrastructure, including tracks, signals, and other infrastructure that supports rail service.
- Railroad stations within the service communities
- A service provider and governance structure

The East – West Passenger Rail Study addresses the first three requirements listed. First, the Massachusetts geography was reviewed to identify any potential linear corridors for connecting these service communities. Creating a new, dedicated transportation corridor for an East – West passenger rail service was considered and rejected. An entirely new transportation corridor would entail land acquisition needs that would have major residential, environmental, historic, and community impacts, which would render such a new corridor

infeasible from both a practical and environmental permitting perspective, especially if existing linear corridors with lesser impacts are available. Fortunately, such existing corridors are available; these are generally existing east – west-oriented rail and highway transportation corridors. A corridor that would depend on a mixture of intercity bus and intercity rail was also rejected as contrary to the study's goals, particularly for the area west of Springfield.

#### **Boston – Albany Rail Mainline**

The Boston – Albany rail mainline corridor offers many advantages as a potential East – West passenger rail corridor. It provides a continuous linear corridor with existing railroad track, signal, and other ancillary infrastructure.

The Boston – Albany rail mainline provides connections to all service communities, including existing rail stations in all the major cities: Pittsfield, Springfield, Worcester, and Boston. West of Worcester, the rail corridor is owned by CSX Transportation, the third-largest North American freight railroad (by 2019 revenues) and the largest freight railroad operating in New England. East of Worcester, the rail line is owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

The Boston – Albany corridor traverses a succession of north-south river systems and an ascent through the Berkshire Mountains. The challenging topography required the builders to follow an alignment with multiple sharp curves to maintain reasonable gradients that were within the capabilities of 19<sup>th</sup> Century construction methods. This presents challenges to operating a higher-speed passenger rail service.

#### **Interstate 90/Massachusetts Turnpike**

The second corridor that was identified as having potential for accommodating East – West passenger rail service is along the Interstate 90/Massachusetts Turnpike (I-90) corridor. This corridor

provides many advantages for accommodating an East – West rail alignment. It is a continuous linear corridor that is already owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In addition, it is generally wider and straighter than the Boston – Albany rail mainline, which could enable the creation of a lower-curvature, higher-speed rail line.

Figure 2-1 shows ownership and freight terminals along the existing rail corridor, as well as the alignment of the Massachusetts Turnpike.

*Figure 2-1 – Railroad Ownership, Existing and Potential Passenger Stations, and Relevant Freight Rail Terminals*



However, use of the I-90 corridor for a rail line would also present several challenges. The Massachusetts Turnpike is a grade-separated expressway, with many bridges that carry the highway over or under roadways that cross it. A new railroad line would have impacts on these bridges, as well as on highway access ramps. In addition, the I-90 corridor climbs steeper grades that automobiles and trucks can navigate, but that are more difficult for trains. This would require infrastructure – either elevated viaducts or excavated depressed segments – in numerous locations order to create grades that trains can traverse.

The I-90 corridor is also severely space-constrained in some segments, in particular the section of the highway from downtown Boston to Route 128/Interstate 95. The I-90 corridor also does not provide direct connections to downtown Pittsfield, Springfield, or Worcester, and

would require supplemental connections using new access alignments to those destinations.

### Northern Tier/Patriot Corridor – Fitchburg Line

Another corridor that was reviewed for the potential to accommodate East – West rail is the so-called “northern tier” rail corridor. This corridor generally parallels Route 2 in the northern portion of Massachusetts. It comprises two principal segments: west of Fitchburg, the “Patriot Corridor” freight rail line, which is owned Pan Am Southern, (a joint venture of Pan Am Railways and Norfolk Southern Railway); east of Fitchburg, the MBTA Fitchburg Line commuter rail provides connections for 18 stations to Boston’s North Station. This corridor was not pursued as a viable East – West connection because it does not provide direct or proximate rail connections to Springfield or Pittsfield, two of Massachusetts’ original gateway cities. While adding a new rail service along either the Boston – Albany mainline or the “northern tier” rail corridor would increase passenger rail service through gateway cities already served by MBTA Commuter Rail another original gateway city, Greater Worcester represents a larger market than Fitchburg-Leominster.

### 2.4. Study Context

The potential for implementation of a passenger rail service in the East – West corridor is informed by many previous, ongoing and future transportation projects and planning studies. The following section summarizes the relevant projects and studies that have significant bearing on the analysis and assumptions of the study, along with the key issues that pertain to the evaluation and potential implementation of the East – West Passenger Rail project.

**Northern New England Intercity Rail Initiative (NNEIRI).** The NNEIRI study is an important predecessor to the East – West Passenger Rail Study. NNEIRI completed a planning and environmental review of

passenger rail in New England, with a study area that included the Boston – Springfield segment of the East – West study corridor.

The states of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Vermont collaborated with the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) to evaluate the potential for a safe and efficient intercity passenger rail system that seamlessly links major cities in New England. To advance this vision, the NNEIRI study evaluated infrastructure and service improvements for providing high-speed passenger rail for connections between Boston and Montreal, Boston and New York, and New York and Montreal. This study included the segment of the East – West Corridor between Springfield and Boston along the Inland Route, as shown in Figure 2-2.

Figure 2-2 – Northern New England Intercity Rail Initiative (NNEIRI)



In 2016, the NNEIRI study completed a Tier 1 Environmental Assessment (EA) through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The NNEIRI Tier 1 EA assessed corridor-level benefits and impacts. It included an Alternatives Analysis and a Service Development Plan, which provided evaluation of three alternatives with a range of improvements, costs, speeds, and frequencies. Alternatives with speeds greater than 90 mph were not advanced due to right-of-way constraints. As a result, the best travel time for NNEIRI alternatives was 1:49 between Boston and Springfield. Based on the EA, the Federal Railroad issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), which determined that the project would have no significant environmental impacts and could move forward without an Environmental Impact Statement. The next phase of review would be a Tier 2 NEPA review, which would investigate more detailed project-level benefits and impacts.

**Relevant Projects and Studies Assumed to be Complete Prior to East – West Implementation.** Since the publication of NNEIRI in 2016, significant infrastructure improvements have been completed or are being actively pursued along key Corridor segments, which could be beneficial for increased passenger rail service, particularly between Worcester and Boston and in Springfield. In addition, several other projects and initiatives have been completed or are implementing significant infrastructure improvements on other existing rail lines and related facilities. The projects and services listed below, some of which are shown in Figure 2-3, are either complete or well advanced in the project development and environmental process. Therefore, they are assumed to be operational as part of the “future baseline” condition for the study analysis.

Figure 2-3 – Sample of Relevant Projects and Studies Assumed to be Completed Prior to Implementation



NHHS Rail Program (CTrail Hartford Line)



Springfield Union Station Improvements



South Station Expansion (SSX)



Worcester Triple Tracking Study

- New Haven – Hartford – Springfield (NHHS) Program (CTrail Hartford Line):** In Connecticut, a robust regional rail service between New Haven, Hartford, and Springfield was inaugurated in 2018 via the NHHS High-Speed Intercity Passenger Rail (HSIPR) Project. The improvements increased maximum permitted speeds to 110 miles per hour (mph), reduced travel times and conflicts with freight trains along shared segments, and increased frequencies from 6 to 16 daily round trips in addition to the St. Albans to Washington, DC *Vermont Service* operating the route.
  - Springfield Union Station Improvements:** In early 2020, MassDOT completed a major component of its long-term improvement program for Springfield Union Station. The installation of a new full-length, high-level Platform C enables the terminal to accommodate five-car trainsets and provide ADA-compliant level boarding. Additional improvements are planned to further expand its capacity.
- Knowledge Corridor:** In western Massachusetts, passenger service along the Connecticut River Line, which provides access to Greenfield, Northampton, and Holyoke en route to Springfield, was restored in 2014 after significant corridor rehabilitation. This alignment provided Amtrak’s daily *Vermont Service* with a more direct route between Brattleboro and Springfield. The Knowledge Corridor also currently provides service on the *Valley Flyer*; this two-year pilot service, which began in August 2019, is operated by Amtrak and provides two daily round trip trains between Greenfield, MA and New Haven, CT. It operates as an extension of Amtrak Hartford Line trains and provides service to the following station stops in Massachusetts: Springfield, Holyoke, Northampton, and Greenfield. The pilot service demonstration period occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic which could modify the evaluation criteria to reflect the impact to travel demand
- South Station Expansion (SSX):** Boston’s South Station is capacity-constrained, and expanding the station is a priority for

increasing rail service to downtown Boston. The proposed expansion project would provide seven new tracks and four new platforms, as well a significant reconfiguration of existing track infrastructure, platforms, train layover facilities and passenger waiting spaces. MassDOT has completed environmental review and is advancing early action elements of the project.

- **Worcester Triple Tracking Study:** The construction of 10 miles of new triple track rail sections between Route 128 and Framingham would improve rail line capacity and enable express trains and those with limited stops (such as the MBTA's *Heart to Hub*, Amtrak's *Lake Shore Limited*, and a new East – West service) to bypass local commuter rail traffic. The project would entail moderate track realignments and major upgrades to signals, stations, bridges and highway grade crossings, and new interlockings as well as construction of the new 3<sup>rd</sup> mainline track.
- **Worcester Union Station Improvements:** As recommended in the NNEIRI study, the development of a new center island platform would increase operational capacity at Worcester Union Station for existing and future passenger services, including a potential East-West service, by allowing multiple trains to serve the terminal at once. In addition, the project includes new passenger connections to the station and parking, as well as track and signal upgrades. This project recently completed the design phase. It is funded for construction in the MassDOT Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) beginning in federal fiscal year 2021, with construction completion anticipated in 2022.
- **Worcester Line Positive Train Control (PTC) Upgrades:** By preventing trains from exceeding authorized speeds (including work zones) or colliding, PTC provides additional operational safety features. The MBTA has implemented PTC for the existing train control system along its Worcester Line from Boston to Worcester and is scheduled to complete work by December 30,

2020. CSX is implementing PTC from Worcester to Springfield and Pittsfield.

**Other Potential Projects.** The projects above are assumed to be part of the future condition for when an East – West Passenger Rail project could be implemented. In addition, there are several other potential projects that are less developed and have less certainty about their final configuration and likelihood of implementation.

While these projects have the potential to affect passenger rail services along the Corridor, they are not assumed to be in place as part of the East – West Passenger Rail baseline condition, and the successful operation of the East – West Passenger Rail service is not dependent upon their completion. Nevertheless, their key elements are summarized below.

- **Amtrak Northeast Corridor (NEC) Future:** This comprehensive study recommended integrating frequent service between Springfield and New Haven via the Hartford Line into Amtrak's future operations portfolio for the Northeast Corridor. NEC Future contemplated a dramatic increase in intercity trains serving Springfield by 2040, moving from a 2014 total of two daily trains to 35, with four Intercity and two Regional peak hour trains.
- **MBTA Rail Vision:** The MBTA undertook a comprehensive review of its Commuter Rail network to identify opportunities for significantly enhancing the system's transit capacity and access. After assessing a broad range of long-term infrastructure and service investment scenarios, the MBTA Fiscal Management and Control Board endorsed the study's "full transformation" alternative. This option includes the electrification of the lines, expansion of the train fleet, and improvements to stations and rail lines. These upgrades would allow 15-minute service all day for "Inner Core" stations closer to Boston and at major "Key Stations" like Worcester.
- **MassDOT Allston Multimodal Project:** This project would rehabilitate the deteriorating Massachusetts Turnpike/Interstate

90 (I-90) viaduct and interchange in Boston’s Allston neighborhood. The project is also expected to realign the highway, create new urban development opportunities, and enhance the multimodal transportation infrastructure in the area with a new layover facility for MBTA Commuter Rail, a new transit center (West Station), and improved track infrastructure. The expanded midday train layover facility, this project could divert some trains from South Station and relieve track congestion, which could provide additional terminal capacity for facilities would benefit servicing future East-West passenger trains.

## 2.5. Civic Engagement

The East-West Passenger Rail Study has entailed a robust civic engagement effort that includes an Advisory Committee; public meetings and briefings; legislative briefings; a project website; email notices to subscribers; and responses to questions.

**Advisory Committee.** MassDOT developed an Advisory Committee consisting of individuals representing diverse perspectives from Pittsfield to Boston. The members include:

- Owners/operators along the corridor
- Legislative officials
- State officials
- Regional planning agencies
- Key municipalities
- Business groups

The Advisory Committee provided jurisdictional, policy, technical, and administrative input in advance of major decisions. Table 2-1 lists the members of the committee. In addition to participating in meetings, the Advisory Committee members also provided written comments on alternatives. They had a significant role in narrowing a wide range of options for improving mobility to six and then to three final alternatives for analysis.

The Advisory Committee met six times: in December 2018; July 2019; two meetings in February 2020; and online meetings in June and September 2020; these last two meetings were held online due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on public gatherings. Presentations were shared at each meeting and posted on the [project website](#). Participating members of the public were also able to provide feedback, questions or comments at each Advisory Committee meeting.

*Table 2-1 – Advisory Committee Members*

| NAME                       | ORGANIZATION                             |
|----------------------------|--|
| Todd Bailey                | Baystate Health                          |
| Rep. Natalie Blais         | MA State House of Representatives        |
| Sen. Joseph A. Boncore     | MA State Senate                          |
| Jonathan Butler            | 1Berkshire                               |
| Patrick Carnevale          | Western Massachusetts Office of the      |
| Sen. Harriette L. Chandler | MA State Senate                          |
| Sen. Jo Comerford          | MA State Senate                          |
| Nancy Creed                | Springfield Regional Chamber             |
| Rep. Mindy Domb            | MA State House of Representatives        |
| Marc Draisen               | Metropolitan Area Planning Council       |
| Linda Dunlavy              | Franklin Regional Council of Governments |
| Astrid Glynn               | MassDOT                                  |
| Daren Gray                 | Baystate Health                          |
| Richard Griffin            | MassDevelopment                          |
| John Hahey                 | Massachusetts Association of Railroads   |
| Sen. Adam Hinds            | MA State Senate                          |
| Bill Hollister             | Amtrak                                   |
| Mayor Donald Humason       | Westfield                                |
| Linda Leduc                | Town of Palmer                           |
| Sen. Eric Lesser           | MA State Senate                          |
| Paul Matthews              | Worcester Regional Research Bureau       |
| Thomas Matuszko            | Berkshire Regional Planning Commission   |
| Rep. Jim McGovern          | US Congress                              |
| Rep. Seth Moulton          | US Congress                              |
| Rep. Richard Neal          | US Congress                              |

| NAME                     | ORGANIZATION   |
|--------------------------|--|
| Melissa Olesen           | Office of Senator Edward J. Markey                       |
| Rep. Alice Hanlon Peisch | MA State House of Representatives                        |
| John Perez               | Minority Business Council - Springfield Regional Chamber |
| Rep. Thomas M. Petrolati | MA State House of Representatives                        |
| Mayor Joseph Petty       | City of Worcester  |
| Janet A. Pierce          | Central MA Regional Planning Commission                  |
| Rep. Smitty Pignatelli   | MA State House of Representatives                        |
| Jody Ray                 | MBTA Commuter Rail                                       |
| Kimberly H. Robinson     | Pioneer Valley Planning Commission                       |
| Rep. Lindsay Sabadosa    | MA State House of Representatives                        |
| Mayor Domenic J. Sarno   | City of Springfield                                      |
| Peter Schwartz           | Federal Railroad Administration                          |
| Sandra Sheehan           | Pioneer Valley Transit Authority                         |
| Rep. Todd Smola          | MA State House of Representatives                        |
| Rick Sullivan            | Western Massachusetts EDC                                |
| Tonia Tassinari          | MA Dept. of Housing & Economic Development               |
| Jeremy Thompson          | 495/MetroWest Partnership                                |
| Mayor Linda M. Tyer      | City of Pittsfield                                       |

**Public Meetings.** MassDOT hosted three public meetings at key points in the process to share the information collected to date and gather ideas and comments from the public.

The first meeting, in March 2019, introduced the Study process and factors in the analyses. It included an open house with presentation boards that provided information on potential riders; employment along the corridor; speeds and travel times; physical conditions; other operators; a range of service alternatives; and examples in other corridors.

The second meeting was in February 2020. The main topic was the Alternative Analysis, including evaluation criteria, ridership methodology, the Alternatives Analysis, and questions and discussion.

In addition to the Advisory Committee and first public meeting input, MassDOT received 75 emails commenting on these goals.

A third public meeting is planned for October 2020. This meeting will entail an update of the study process; a review of the three Final Alternatives selection and evaluation; costs; environmental and community impacts and the Benefit-Cost Analysis.

All meetings offered accessible and multi-linguistic meeting materials consistent with MassDOT requirements. The virtual meetings, held in response to COVID-19 pandemic meeting restrictions, offered closed captioning and Spanish interpretation. Virtual meetings were recorded through an online webconferencing platform and posted on the project website.

**Briefings.** The East-West Study team also briefed members of the legislature, interested stakeholders and Regional Planning Agencies on the Study.

- Legislative briefings were held in October 2018, July 2019, and October 2020
- Regional Planning Agency presentations and discussions took place in October 2018, July 2019, February 2020, and September 2020
- Study team members responded to requests for information throughout the study process and prepared technical memos

**Website and Communication Materials.** MassDOT created the East-West Passenger Rail Study [website](#) to define the Study, post meeting minutes and presentations, and invite stakeholders to sign up for email posts on the project or send questions to the project team. All of the Study presentations are posted on the site, as well as the project fact sheet in English and Spanish, upcoming events and additional resources. The [fact sheet](#) provided detailed information about the Study schedule, corridor, alternatives development and analysis. Stakeholders and interested parties were invited to sign up for project

updates, meeting notices and meeting summaries. As of September 2020, there were 1,270 subscribers. Advisory Committee members and the public frequently provided comments, questions and preferences through the website contact information.

**Civic Engagement Input.** Throughout the study process, Advisory Committee members, Corridor residents, and study stakeholders have articulated a strong desire for better connections between western, central, and eastern Massachusetts. Advisory Committee members and other stakeholders have provided input on anticipated benefits from an East – West passenger rail service for residents and businesses throughout the corridor, including:

- Western Massachusetts – Provide passenger rail connections to opportunities in central and eastern Massachusetts, including jobs, recreational opportunities, and important regional assets like Logan Airport, Boston’s hospital and healthcare cluster, educational institutions, and entertainment/recreational destinations such as Fenway Park and the TD Garden
- Eastern Massachusetts – By providing more frequent and reliable rail service, enable workers with jobs in eastern Massachusetts to have access to a less expensive housing in central and western Massachusetts, while providing employers with access to a larger pool of potential employees
- Full Corridor – Divert automobile trips from I-90 and provide congestion-relief benefits while reducing climate and air quality impacts

These priorities from the Advisory Committee and the study’s civic engagement process, combined with the study’s rationale and goals, guided the evaluation of Existing Conditions discussed in Section 3, as well as the development and evaluation of improvement alternatives discussed in Section 4.