



Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is the Palmer Station Planning and Design project?

A: The Palmer Station Planning and Design project is to identify the location for a new passenger rail station serving the Town of Palmer and the surrounding communities as a step towards realizing the Compass Rail Program. The goal of the project is to enhance mobility and connectivity, support local planning goals, and drive economic development.

Q: What is Compass Rail, and how does it relate to Palmer?

A: Compass Rail is made up of existing and proposed West-East and North-South services intersecting at a robust hub in Springfield. Compass Rail – Passenger Rail for the Commonwealth – is a vision for intercity passenger rail within Massachusetts and beyond. The goal of Compass Rail is to enhance mobility, expand transportation choice, and support economic development goals through transportation investments. Compass Rail integrates existing MassDOT-supported services with new, proposed services in a unified vision.

Existing services supported and managed by MassDOT under the Compass Rail banner include the following Amtrak-operated routes:

- **Vermont** between Washington, D.C. and St. Albans, VT with Massachusetts stops in Springfield, Holyoke, Northampton, and Greenfield
- **Valley Flyer** between New Haven, CT and Greenfield with Massachusetts stops in Springfield, Holyoke, Northampton, and Greenfield
- **Hartford Line and Northeast Regional** between Springfield and New Haven, CT or Washington, D.C.
- **Berkshire Flyer**, a seasonal, pilot service, between Pittsfield and New York City.

West-East Rail represents proposed, new Compass Rail services that focus on improved connections between western and eastern Massachusetts. These routes include:

- **Inland Route** to operate between Boston and New Haven, CT via Springfield
- **Boston & Albany Corridor** via Pittsfield.

It is expected that future passenger service through Palmer would be included in the proposed West-East routes, which would be operated by Amtrak and would include an Inland Route between Boston and New Haven through Springfield and a Boston and Albany route. Both routes would use the Boston & Albany Line owned and operated by CSX Transportation (CSX).

For more information on Compass Rail, please visit <https://www.mass.gov/compass-rail>.

Q: How were potential station sites identified?

A: Reintroducing passenger rail service in Palmer and the surrounding communities has been studied for many years. One of the previous evaluations, the 2016 Northern New England Intercity Rail Initiative (NNEIRI) Alternatives Analysis Report, broadly evaluated five potential sites. Other evaluations included a 2017 Palmer Transit Oriented Development Draft Conceptual Plan and a 2021 Palmer Master Plan. All identified possible locations for a future service to the region and all informed the list of locations to be considered under this Palmer Station Planning and Design project. As a first step, a review of the sites identified in the 2016 NNEIRI Alternatives Analysis, the 2017 Palmer Transit Oriented Development Draft Conceptual Plan were evaluated as well as a site identified by the public in 2023. An additional review of vacant or underutilized sites along the corridor in the vicinity of Palmer assessed properties adjacent to the rail line. In total, nine sites were identified as potential station sites for review under this Palmer Station Planning and Design project.

Q: How were the potential station sites evaluated?

A: The project used a two-level approach to compare and evaluate each of the station site locations. A Level 1 Fatal Flaw Screening evaluated the operational and engineering feasibility of constructing a station at each of the potential sites – in short, Level 1 evaluated whether a site can fit all the necessary infrastructure without adversely impacting or interfering with existing freight operations. Sites that advanced beyond Level 1 into the Level 2 Comparative Evaluation were further evaluated for ability to deliver on project goals – in short, Level 2 evaluated how well a site would enhance mobility, provide economic opportunity, minimize environmental impact and deliver a timely and cost-effective station stop.

Q: Why does the station need to be on the Compass Rail Corridor?

A: Locating a station stop directly on the corridor it is served by is a crucial element of an efficient railroad operation. Stations located off a corridor would require what's called "reverse move" to get a train serving a station off the main alignment and then back on. Avoiding reverse moves on a rail corridor is crucial to ensuring safe moves, efficiency, and reducing operational complexity and delays. Keeping stations on a main alignment provides faster, more reliable service. Reverse moves can also cause operational hazards and increase congestion and wear on infrastructure, disrupting schedules and decreasing track capacity. For these reasons, the project aims to locate Palmer Station along the Compass Rail corridor to optimize travel time and to avoid impacts to the existing freight operations.

Q: Why is the Central Corridor not part of this evaluation?

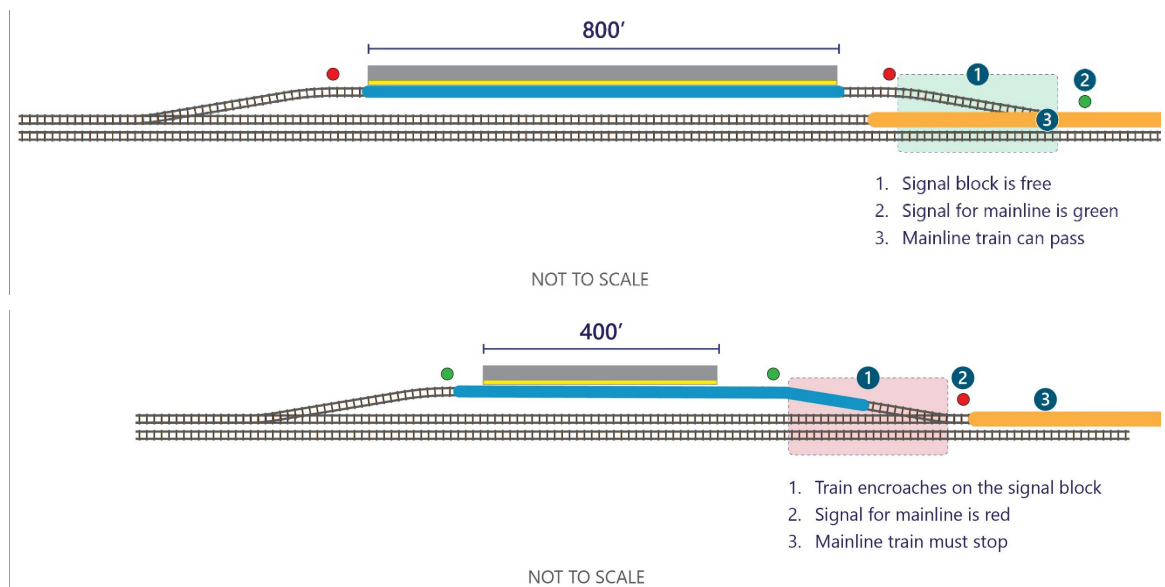
A: The Central Corridor between Brattleboro, VT and New London, CT was evaluated for potential passenger rail service in a 2017 MassDOT study, the *Central Corridor Passenger Rail Feasibility Study*. The corridor, which follows the New England Central freight line and crosses the west-east Boston & Albany Line at Palmer, does not currently offer passenger service. The study concluded that the limited projected ridership and ancillary benefits did not warrant the expenses associated with beginning and operating a new passenger service on the corridor, and MassDOT is not actively pursuing passenger service investments. The Alternatives Analysis for a future Palmer Station required potential sites to be located on the Compass Rail corridor where MassDOT is actively implementing intercity rail service.

Q: Why does the platform need a station siding – why can't it be directly on the CSX mainline?

A: As part of the Compass Rail program, MassDOT worked closely with CSX and Amtrak to model operational capacity along the Boston & Albany Corridor. Results from this operational modeling demonstrate there is limited corridor capacity, particularly around the Palmer Yard. Any new passenger rail service would have to be provided on a station siding. A station siding on an active freight corridor allows passenger trains to pull off the main track when stopping at a station, enabling freight and other trains to continue moving without delay. A Palmer Station on a station siding will improve capacity for a passenger service through a constrained part of the corridor and offer additional operational flexibility.

Q: Why does the platform need to be 800' long?

A: According to the Amtrak Station Program Planning Guidelines (2013), Amtrak station platform lengths vary from a 700' to 1200' preferred length. On State Corridors, requirements vary from 300' to 700' minimums. However, platform lengths are driven by the frequency and type of service provided by Amtrak. The required platform length for Long Distance trains is derived from a need to eliminate double stopping trains for access to and from all cars in a train consist. The Compass Rail corridor will be served by Amtrak-operated service, for which the future Amtrak fleet will be 750'. In order to provide a single stop at the station, as well as continue to allow freight movement without delay, the platform length would need to be 800' on a station siding to accommodate the full length of an Amtrak train set stopping at Palmer Station. As shown in the examples below comparing an 800' platform to a 400' platform, an 800' platform allows the passenger train to stop at the platform without blocking other trains from passing on the mainline, while a shorter platform length would result in a train stopped at the platform encroaching on the mainline signals, prohibiting mainline trains from passing while the train is stopped.



Q: Why does the station need high-level platforms?

A: Consistent with the goal of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), MassDOT aims to eliminate discrimination against individuals with disabilities and provide them with the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. The goal of ADA in the context of station design is to provide high-level platforms that ensure equal accessibility for all users. As such, MassDOT policy is to provide equal accessibility for all users, including at Palmer Station, with high-level platforms that ensure level-access boarding for all coaches. This is consistent with Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) construction guidance, Amtrak station guidance, and regulations from the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (MAAB).

Q: What is the role of the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) in this project?

The Palmer Station Planning and Design project is state-funded, and there is no formal role for FRA at this time. As a concept for a station is progressed, MassDOT may engage FRA in an advisory or regulatory capacity. In the event federal funds are pursued to advance the project beyond conceptual design, MassDOT may enter a more formal role with FRA to manage project activities. At present, FRA has not evaluated nor commented on potential station concepts in Palmer.

Q: There is a CSX freight yard in Palmer. How does this influence the potential station site selection?

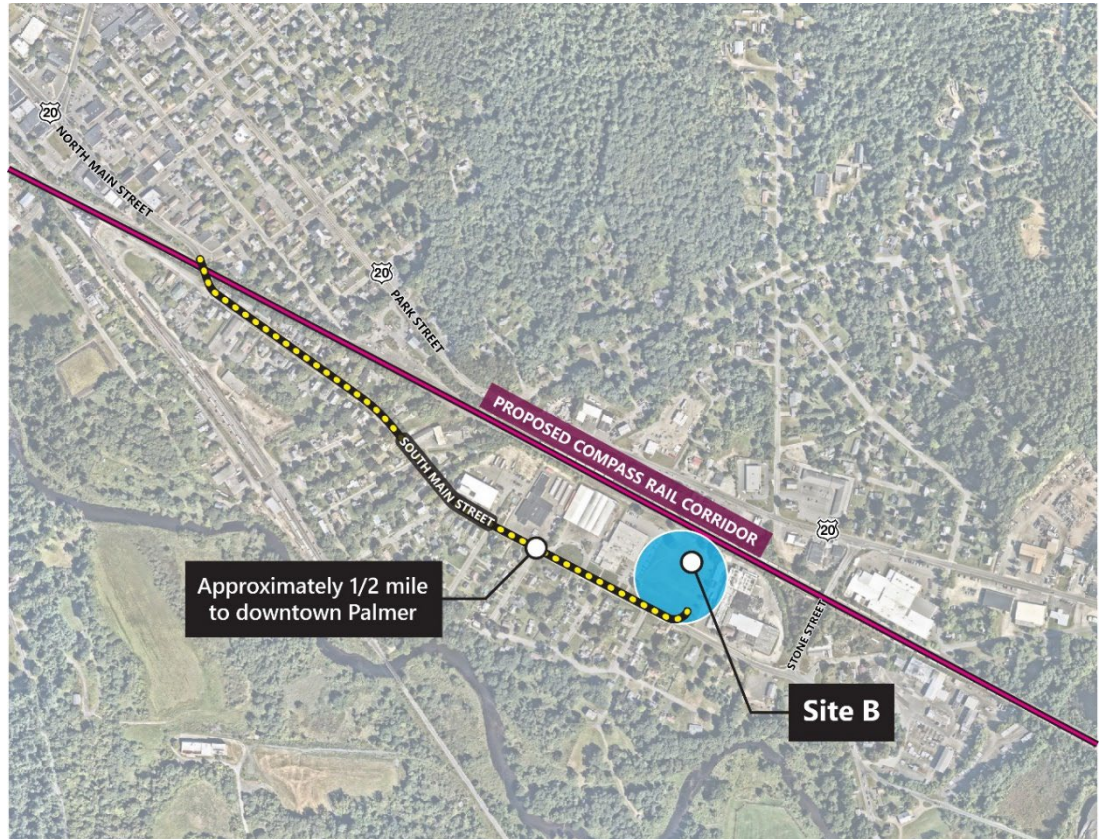
A: The CSX freight yard in Palmer provides many critical functions in the region's rail network. The yard acts as an interchange point for many local shortlines including Mass Central and the New England Central Railroad (NECR). This facility ensures smooth transitions of freight between different rail networks, maintaining efficient operations and enabling the continued flow of goods that support local economic activities serving nearby industrial parks. To maintain active operation through and adjacent to Palmer Yard, a proposed Palmer Station would need to be able to accommodate infrastructure that does not interfere with critical functions of the region's rail network.

Q: Why was the historic depot (Site H) not advanced through the full alternatives analysis?

A: Union Station in Palmer, Massachusetts, is a historic railroad station building designed by H. H. Richardson, which opened in 1884 and is significant for its architecture and value as a historic transportation hub. Today, the depot is partially occupied by the Steaming Tender Restaurant and is the adjacent parcel between the CSX and New England Central Railroad (NECR) corridors. This site was highlighted by the Town of Palmer and steering committee of local officials and residents as a desirable location due to its proximity to the downtown and its connection to Palmer's history. The project team has determined that locating a Palmer Station at this site would be difficult and costly due to modern design standards and operating requirements. During the site evaluation process of the Palmer Station Alternatives Analysis, the depot was determined to not have adequate space to accommodate the necessary train station tracks and platform without requiring costly additional track infrastructure, bridge reconstruction and significant property takings. At this conclusion, the historic depot (Site H) was removed from further consideration.

Q: Which site was selected to advance to conceptual design?

A: Based on the alternatives analysis results and public input, Site B (South of Palmer Yard) resulted in the most favorable evaluation. Based on this Level 2 Comparative Evaluation, Site B appears to be the least costly and will be the simplest to construct and easier to permit. Public feedback also seems to favor Site B for its relative proximity to downtown and simplicity. The Level 2 Comparative Evaluation recommends Site B advance to Conceptual Design.

**Q: How has MassDOT engaged local stakeholders in the decision-making process?**

A: Prior to project initiation, a local stakeholder group was assembled consisting of Town of Palmer staff, municipal representatives, as well as regional planning staff. The stakeholder group has been instrumental in providing MassDOT input and feedback throughout the project, including towards developing the project purpose, goals, site identification, alternatives analysis approach, and results.

Additionally, the project team has held multiple coordination meetings with local stakeholders, including the owners of the historic station and representatives of the Central Corridor Passenger Rail Coalition. MassDOT held a public meeting for the project at the Palmer Public Library on December 16, 2024.

Q: Where can I find more information about the project?

A: Please visit the project website at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/palmer-station-planning-design>. The project website includes a project overview, materials shared at the public meeting, and more detailed documentation of the site identification and alternatives analysis.