

# 7

## Passenger Rail



2016 Regional Transportation Plan

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Railroads have a long and proud history in Franklin County dating back to the 1840s. In 1920, there were four separate railroad companies offering freight and passenger service to several towns in Franklin County, and as many as seventy trains a day operated in all directions. Today, Amtrak, the national passenger rail corporation, operates one train daily that passes through Franklin County twice a day on its travel between Washington, D.C. and St. Albans, Vermont.

## Existing Conditions

### **Knowledge Corridor/Connecticut River Main Line Passenger Rail**

Historically, passenger rail service in Western Massachusetts traveled north-south along what is known as the Connecticut River Main Line or the Knowledge Corridor. This line roughly parallels Interstate 91 and the Connecticut River from New Haven, CT to St. Albans, VT and beyond. During the 1980s, due to a series of unresolved disputes regarding track maintenance, Amtrak relocated service away from the Connecticut River Main Line, traveling inland from Springfield, MA to Palmer, MA, where it turns north and rejoins the Connecticut River Main Line in East Northfield, MA. This detour added approximately 25 minutes to each one way trip and removed direct service to Franklin County. However, in 2014, Amtrak returned the Vermonter service to the Connecticut River Main Line with stops in Springfield, Holyoke, Northampton, and Greenfield once per day in each direction.

In January of 2010, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was awarded \$70 million in federal stimulus funding to make improvements to the Connecticut River Main Line to extend and restore passenger service to the Knowledge Corridor. The improvements included: crosstie and rail replacement, rehabilitation of grade crossings, reactivation of passing sidings, upgrading of switches and signals, and improvements to bridges. The restored alignment cuts 25 minutes per trip and adds stops in Northampton, Holyoke, and Greenfield. These improvements allow freight trains to operate at a much faster speed of 40 miles per



**Inaugural run of the first passenger train to return to Greenfield on December 29, 2014.**

hour, rather than the previous 10 miles per hour. The passenger rail service can also now travel significantly faster as well – up to 80 miles per hour through the region. The newly rerouted Vermonter train began service on December 29, 2014. The train now arrives in Greenfield twice a day (once in each direction) at the John W. Olver Transit Center.

The Vermonter route is heavily subsidized by the Vermont Agency of Transportation, MassDOT, and the Connecticut Department of Transportation. It travels between Washington D.C. and St. Albans, VT via Philadelphia, New York, and Springfield. This route used to connect to Montreal, Canada, first by train, and later by bus. However, in 2004, the connecting bus service to Montreal was discontinued. As a result, the Vermonter service no longer provides a connection to Montreal. However, regional leaders are making progress in reconnecting Montreal with passenger rail service. The main factor in preventing access to Montreal has been border crossing issues, but it is anticipated that these issues will be resolved in the next year.

## **Current Activities and Future Planning**

### **New England Vision for High Speed and Intercity Passenger Rail**

In 2009, the six states in New England came together to create a Vision for a future regional rail system that will enhance New England in many ways, including: providing a foundation for economic competitiveness; promoting livable communities; and improving energy efficiency and environmental quality. The Vision is based around a high speed rail network that will link major cities in New England with smaller cities and rural areas and internationally to Montreal. This high speed rail network is composed of a few key corridors as shown in the map on the following page. Significant investment and infrastructure improvements to the existing rail lines along these corridors have been made or are under active exploration. The following section will detail the Northern New England Intercity Rail Initiative (NNEIRI), which is the formal study to evaluate service options along the identified key corridors.

### **Northern New England Intercity Rail Initiative**

Massachusetts, Vermont, and Connecticut are partners in the Northern New England Intercity Rail Initiative (NNEIRI), which is a study to examine the opportunities and impacts of more frequent and higher speed passenger rail service in the three states. Specifically, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) and Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTRANS), in collaboration with the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) and the Federal Rail Administration (FRA), are examining two major rail corridors known as the Inland Route and the Boston-to-Montreal Route. The Inland Route corridor links Boston and Western Massachusetts via Worcester and Springfield, MA and then travels southerly from Springfield to New Haven, CT connecting to the larger Amtrak Northeast



Northern New England Intercity Rail Initiative Study Map. Source: MassDOT

Corridor. The Boston to Montreal corridor is the same as the Inland Route between Boston and Springfield. From Springfield, the rail corridor then runs northerly following the Connecticut River Main Line into Vermont and ending at the Montreal Central Station in Quebec. The goal of the NNEIRI Study, which includes the entire 470 mile corridor between Boston, Springfield, New Haven, and Montreal, is to:

- Evaluate ridership potential;
- Identify environmental effects; and
- Create service development plans for both corridors.

### Current Project Status

The NNEIRI has evaluated three “Initial Build Alternatives” and a “No Build Alternative” for potential passenger service along the Inland and Boston-to-Montreal Routes. They included variations of speeds, equipment, and track engineering. After evaluating these alternatives, the study proposed in 2015 a “Draft Build Alternative Service,” which recommends:

- Top speeds of 75 mph;
- No express service between major cities (local service only);
- 8 round trips between Boston and New Haven (via Springfield);
- 1 round trip between Boston and Montreal (via Springfield);
- Double-tracking between Worcester to Springfield; and
- Additional Vermont sidings.

The next steps for the NNEIRI is for the project partners to conduct a Tier 1 Environmental Assessment, hold stakeholder engagement and public meetings regarding the proposed Draft Build Alternative, and develop Service Development Plans for each corridor.

### **New Haven-Springfield Commuter Rail Implementation**

Part of the Vision for the New England High-Speed and Intercity Rail Network is the New Haven-Springfield commuter rail line. Formal planning for improvements to this corridor has been in progress since 2005. The New Haven to Springfield commuter route is composed of 62 miles of existing rail infrastructure that are currently owned and operated by Amtrak. This rail line, which is often referred to as the “Springfield Line,” travels from Union Station in New Haven, CT through numerous towns and cities to Union Station in Springfield, MA. The new rail service is envisioned to provide future commuter rail access to the towns and cities along the rail corridor; multiple links to Amtrak’s Intercity service; direct links to the existing Metro North Railroad and Shore Line East Commuter Rail services in New Haven; and a connection to the proposed New Britain-Hartford Busway.

## Project History

In June 2005, the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) completed an implementation study for commuter rail service between New Haven, Connecticut and Springfield, Massachusetts. The Commuter Rail Implementation Study evaluated the ridership, impacts, and costs of providing commuter rail service from New Haven to Hartford to Springfield, and explored various service options.

## Current Project Status

In August 2010, ConnDOT completed a *Service Development Plan for the CT New Haven-Hartford-Springfield (NHHS) Corridor*. Much of the Commuter Rail Implementation Study's recommendations were incorporated into this Plan. They include the following key elements:

- Increase one-way intercity trains from 12 to 25 per day;
- Add 21 one-way commuter trains per day;
- Reinstall 24.5 miles of double track on existing single track locations;
- Increase the number of rail stations served by rail from 8 to 13;
- Have all stations incorporate high-level platforms and grade-separated pedestrian facilities;
- Improve the existing station in Windsor Locks to accommodate bus transfers from the station to Bradley Airport; and
- Revise local bus routes to provide bus service to the rail stations.

The total cost of the project is estimated to be \$480 million. The State of Connecticut has agreed to provide \$280 million in funding and the federal government has provided an additional \$161 million in funding through federal stimulus funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) for the needed track upgrades. Together, these funding sources make up almost 80 percent of the needed funding for improvements to this rail line. Final design of the improvements was completed in 2014 and construction is now underway. Operation of the new high-speed rail system should begin in late 2016.

## **Springfield-Greenfield Regional Commuter Rail**

Feeding into the New Haven to Springfield Commuter Rail Service mentioned above is plans for a regional commuter rail service between Springfield and Greenfield. The FRCOG has been working with the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, local mayors, and MassDOT to bring commuter rail service to Western Massachusetts along the Knowledge Corridor. In 2013, the Massachusetts Legislature set aside \$30 million in a transportation bond bill to purchase and rehabilitate decommissioned MBTA locomotives and coach cars to use for commuter service on the Knowledge Corridor. Preliminary plans are for a service that would run six to eight times

a day between Springfield and Greenfield (potentially up to Brattleboro, VT) and feed into the New Haven-Springfield commuter service that will begin running in 2016 with an initial 12 round trips per day between those two cities. Current rough estimates for operating costs are between \$1.8 and 2 million. The next steps include securing funding for the operating costs and determining an entity to operate the service. The goal of regional leaders is to have the commuter service up and running in the next two to four years.

### **East-West Passenger Rail**

There was once also passenger service running east-west through Franklin County with a stop in Greenfield. During the 1950s, this east-west rail line handled eight trains a day as they stopped in the county on their way between Williamstown in the west and Boston in the east. This passenger service was discontinued in the 1960s due to declining passenger demand and deteriorating track infrastructure. Currently, the closest east-west passenger rail service to Franklin County can be picked up in Palmer, West Springfield, or Fitchburg in order to travel east to Boston. There have been efforts over the last few years to expand passenger service further westward towards Greenfield.

Unfortunately, this east-west route is not part of the recent New England Vision for High Speed and Intercity Passenger Rail and has therefore not received comparable attention or funding as the north-south routes in the region. However, there is definitely a demand for east-west passenger service in Franklin County. The surveys and public outreach that were conducted as part of the update to this RTP revealed that many residents in Franklin County would like to travel to Boston via rail for employment, medical, educational, and recreational purposes. The east-west rail line is owned and maintained by PanAm Southern, which is currently working on upgrading this line, also known as the Patriot Corridor, for freight travel. This work, combined with political support from the New England Rail Vision, and funding could lead to a favorable situation in which it is possible that east-west passenger rail is restored to Franklin County. The following section describes the activities related to extending east/west rail.

### **Fitchburg/Gardner Activities**

There are currently 13 trips inbound and outbound each weekday on the Fitchburg Commuter Rail line between the Fitchburg Intermodal Center and North Station in Boston. The Commuter Rail line is operated by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA).

Some Franklin County residents commute to the Boston metropolitan area via the Fitchburg line. One option for traveling to Fitchburg is the current G-Link bus route operated by the FRTA and the Montachusett Area Transit Authority (MART) which provides weekday bus service between Greenfield and Orange (through FRTA), with connecting service from Orange to

Gardner and the Fitchburg Intermodal Center (through MART). The FRTA portion of the G-Link is called the Route 32 bus route. However, for commuters traveling from Greenfield, the trip to Fitchburg is a long one, involving transfers between three different bus routes, and having a total estimated travel time of at least two hours given current bus schedules. After arriving in Fitchburg, commuters still need to take the train and then commute from their train stop to their final destination.

The MBTA conducted the *Fitchburg Commuter Rail Service Expansion Study* (February 2005). The study examined current conditions along the Fitchburg Commuter Rail Line and made recommendations for potential service improvements. Short-term, mid-range and long-range recommendations were proposed. A number of the proposed improvements will have positive impacts for the residents of Franklin County who currently ride, or who would like to ride, this commuter rail service to the Boston metropolitan area.

The short-range recommendations of the Fitchburg Rail Service Expansion Study included a number of station improvement projects and other changes aimed at reducing travel times, and increasing passenger comfort, service reliability, and the overall quality of the service to better meet ridership demands.

The recommended mid-range improvements continued these goals. Among the recommendations is the implementation of a new van/bus shuttle service from Gardner to the Fitchburg Station. One idea is to locate a Park and Ride lot between Fitchburg and Gardner and run shuttle service for the station to and from there.

The long-range recommendations of the study include extending commuter rail service along the Fitchburg Rail line beyond the current terminus in West Fitchburg to Gardner. In 2009, \$55.5 million in federal stimulus ARRA funding was provided for the Wachusett Commuter Rail Extension Project. This project has extended the Fitchburg Commuter rail line by 4.5 miles to a new rail station on the western border of the Town of Fitchburg near Route 2. The project also includes track improvements in Westminster to support freight and passenger rail and a new layover facility for light maintenance. It is expected that the Wachusett Station, which is soon to open, will serve an estimated 400 new commuter rail passengers beginning in Fall 2016. The location of the station near Route 2 will simplify access for commuters as they drive to the train.

Commuter rail service from Gardner to Boston previously operated on the Fitchburg Line in the early 1980s. In the 1980s, the service began with 6 round-trips to Boston each weekday. The service was reduced in 1983, and then discontinued entirely in 1984 due to inadequate



funding. The Fitchburg Commuter Rail Service Expansion Study lists a number of constraints to the expansion of the commuter rail line from Fitchburg 16 miles west to Gardner. The major factor cited is the ownership and availability of the rail line. The rail infrastructure from Boston to Fitchburg is owned by the MBTA. From Fitchburg west, Pan Am Southern owns the infrastructure, and the MBTA would need to negotiate trackage rights with Pan Am Southern to operate commuter rail service on this section. Another major factor is the need to upgrade the tracks. At the present time, half of the Fitchburg-Gardner section is single track, and would need to be at least double track to support commuter service and the continuing freight transport. In addition, there are grade issues with the track just past Westminster into Gardner that adds additional travel miles and limits speeds that make extending service into Gardner very costly for the MBTA. The study estimates the capital costs of upgrading this portion of the line and commencing the commuter service at \$50 million.

The main conclusion of the Fitchburg Commuter Rail Service Expansion Study focused on the study's short-term recommendations and the need to reduce the travel times between Fitchburg and Boston. These recommendations were addressed in the Fitchburg Line Improvement Implementation Plan completed in December 2005. The Fitchburg Line Improvement Plan identified its primary goal as reducing the trip time between Fitchburg and Porter Square in Cambridge to one hour, from the current scheduled trip time of 80 minutes during the morning peak. The Improvement Plan listed many specific steps that could be implemented to help achieve that goal.

The implementation of the mid-range and long-range recommendations is slower, yet still in progress. The new Wachusett Station is a small step in this implementation. The expansion of commuter rail service from Fitchburg to Gardner, and even in the shorter term, the creation of a Park and Ride lot and shuttle service for the Fitchburg Intermodal Center, hold promise for Franklin County commuters seeking transportation options for traveling to the Boston metro area.

The FRCOG, as the staff of the Franklin County Transportation Planning Organization, continues to include a task in its annual Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) to provide support and to advocate for increased passenger rail service in Franklin County, and to participate in, and monitor the various studies and implementation projects that are planned or underway, as discussed in this chapter. In this task, the FRCOG works with other Metropolitan Planning Organizations and state agencies in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont, and New Hampshire to initiate and support efforts to increase passenger rail service in Franklin County and New England.

## **Recommendations for Passenger Rail**

- Continue to participate in and support the introduction of commuter rail service along the Knowledge Corridor line.
- Continue to monitor progress on the implementation of New Haven-Springfield Corridor improvements, and its implications for Franklin County, and the potential for passenger rail commuter service north of Springfield, Massachusetts.
- Continue to participate in the Northern New England Intercity Rail Initiative and support improvements which will benefit Franklin County residents and businesses as feasible.
- Continue to monitor the implementation of the recommendations of the Fitchburg Commuter Rail Service Expansion Study, particularly the recommendations which could most affect Franklin County commuters who currently, or who would like to, use commuter rail to commute to jobs in the Boston metro area.
- Work with the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission to evaluate the feasibility and costs of extending passenger service west from Fitchburg to Franklin County.
- Continue to work with the other New England States to support and assist in creating the New England high speed and intercity rail vision.