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Passenger Rail

2020 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 round trip train per day through Franklin County. “The Vermonter” makes stops in Greenfield each afternoon on its travel between Washington, D.C. and St. Albans, Vermont.

**Existing Conditions**

**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. 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 turned north and rejoined 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.

![Inaugural run of the first passenger train to return to Greenfield on December 29, 2014.](image-url)
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. This restoration was funded by a 2010 $70 million award in federal stimulus funding to the Commonwealth to make improvements to the Connecticut River Main Line. 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 Greenfield, Northampton, and Holyoke. These improvements allow passenger rail service to operate at up to 80 mph through the region, and allows freight trains to operate at a much faster speed of 40 miles per hour, rather than the previous 10 miles per hour. The rerouted Vermonter 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 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 significant progress has been made on this front.

**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.

**Northern New England Intercity Rail Initiative**
Massachusetts, Vermont, and Connecticut were partners in the Northern New England Intercity Rail Initiative (NNEIRI), which was 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), examined 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.
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 goals of the NNEIRI Study, which includes the entire 470-mile corridor between Boston, Springfield, New Haven, and Montreal, were to:

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

The NNEIRI 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, and only included train upgrades within the current rail right-of-way. After evaluating these alternatives, the study proposed in 2015 a “Draft Build Alternative Service,” which recommended:

- 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.

Next steps of the NNEIRI study have not advanced as outlined because attention in Massachusetts has turned toward a stronger desire for passenger rail service between Springfield and Boston. This does not mean that there is lack of interest in making the connections to New Haven and Montreal, however. Connections between Springfield and New Haven have already increased with the launch of CT Rail Hartford Line (see entry further in this chapter), and planning to make the international connection to Montreal continues.

**East-West Passenger Rail Study – Pittsfield, Springfield, Boston**

MassDOT is underway with a study exploring passenger rail service between Pittsfield, Springfield and Boston. MassDOT and the MBTA own the rail corridor between Worcester and Boston, which has expanded commuter rail service to 58 trains per day in both directions. However, the tracks between the New York border and Worcester are owned by CSX, a private freight company. CSX runs approximately 14 freight trains a day from New York to Worcester. Expanding passenger rail service along this segment will either require MassDOT to acquire the right-of-way, or enter into an agreement with CSX. Both options will likely be complicated
and time consuming. Currently, service in the corridor is provided by Amtrak via the Lake Shore Limited, which runs two round trips per day connecting Boston and Chicago.

Unlike the NNEIRI study that examined potential rail upgrades within the existing rail corridor, the East-West Rail Study recognizes that the current alignment has many curves that cannot accommodate high speeds. Therefore, this study is looking at potential improvements in three scenarios: 1) a shared passenger/freight corridor without right-of-way changes; 2) a shared passenger/freight corridor with selected right-of-way changes; and 3) a completely separate corridor running along I-90. Each scenario has its pros and cons ranging from the smallest capital investment required, to the fastest possible travel time.

The next step of the study is to determine six alternatives that include information on travel times, projected ridership, capital investment requirements, and an understanding of the potential benefits and impacts.

**East-West Passenger Rail Study – North Adams, Greenfield, Boston**

State Senator Jo Comerford introduced legislation in 2019 to study the feasibility of restoring passenger rail service between North Adams, Greenfield and Boston. The rail corridor runs along Route 2 in the Northern Tier of Massachusetts and supported passenger rail service until 1968. The study will look at the costs and economic opportunities of establishing rail services between eastern and western Massachusetts along this northern route. The costs to be studied include projected capital costs, operating costs, and revenue estimates. Projected ridership levels, community impact and benefits, and environmental impacts will also be evaluated. Approval of this study still has a number of legislative steps to clear before it can begin. However, it is hoped that the study will begin after the completion of the east-west study that is being conducted for the Pittsfield and Springfield to Boston route.

Surveys and public outreach for this RTP show strong demand for passenger rail service from Greenfield to Boston. A recent question on social media gauging interest in this type of service received over 500 positive responses in a 24-hour period, many with lengthy personal stories about the difficulties people have accessing educational, employment, medical, and recreational opportunities in the capital city.

The east-west rail line is owned and maintained by PanAm Southern, a joint venture between Pan Am Railways and Norfolk Southern, that is currently upgrading its facilities for better freight movement along this corridor known as the Patriot Corridor. Passenger rail service from Boston’s North Station currently terminates in Fitchburg at the new Wachusett Station that opened in 2016. Establishing passenger rail service from Greenfield to Boston would
potentially involve connecting to Fitchburg, at which point travelers can access regular MBTA commuter rail service into the city.

The proposed East-West route between North Adams, Greenfield, and Boston is not currently included in the New England Vision for High Speed and Passenger Rail, but these new developments highlight the importance and potential of such a route. Work should be undertaken to have the vision amended and the route included as a viable and vital link in the network.

**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 began in 2005, and culminated in the launch of CT Rail’s Hartford Line on June 16, 2018. The new service increases the number of weekday trains from 12 to 34 per day. The Hartford Line operates up to 110 mph, making travel time between Springfield and New Haven as little as 81 minutes. From New Haven, there is direct connecting service to New York City, Boston, and other points on the eastern seaboard.

Additional elements implemented as part of this service upgrade included:

- Reinstalling 24.5 miles of double track in existing single track locations;
- Increasing the number of rail stations served by rail from 8 to 13;
- Incorporating high-level platforms and grade-separated pedestrian facilities at all stations;
- Improving the existing station in Windsor Locks to accommodate bus transfers from the station to Bradley International Airport; and
- Revising local bus routes to provide bus service to the rail stations.

**Springfield-Greenfield Regional Commuter Rail**

With the expanded New Haven to Springfield Commuter Rail Service up and running, attention has turned toward expanding service on the Connecticut River Main Line between Springfield and Greenfield. The FRCOG has been working with MassDOT, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, local mayors, and other stakeholders to launch additional pilot service, anticipated to begin in the Fall of 2019. Currently, one round trip per day operates out of the John W. Olver Transit Center in Greenfield. Amtrak’s Vermonter arrives at the station southbound at 1:30 pm and northbound at 4:30 pm., seven days a week. Estimated to cost approximately $1 million a year in operating, the expanded pilot service would use existing Amtrak trains to add two round trips per day on weekdays, and an additional round trip per day on weekends and holidays. While the exact times of the new service are not yet firm, the
planning assumption to date is that there will be two southbound trips in the early morning (approximately 6 am and 8 am), and two northbound trips at night (approximately 10 pm and midnight) on weekdays. Weekends and holidays will have an additional southbound trip around 9:30 am, and an additional northbound trip around 7:30 pm. These trains will also stop in Northampton and Holyoke, prior to their stops in Springfield.

Since relocation of Amtrak’s Vermonter back to the Connecticut River Main Line tracks in 2014, ridership has continued to climb for western Massachusetts stations. Total 2018 ridership on the Vermonter reached 96,696 passengers, with almost a third of that (32,378 riders) coming from western Massachusetts stations. In fact, ridership at stations in Springfield, Holyoke, Northampton and Greenfield nearly doubled from 2014 to 2018, growing from 17,916 to 32,378. Of the 32 stations along the Vermonter route from St. Albans, VT to Washington D.C., the top city pair for ridership and revenue is New York City to Northampton, MA. Greenfield to New York City comes in 6th of the 32 stations. The second and third most popular destinations from Greenfield are Philadelphia and Washington D.C, respectively.

While the proposed service expansion times will not support typical commuting opportunities in western Massachusetts as originally hoped, it will provide the ability for Franklin County residents to travel to New York City and back in the same day. Currently, the train schedule requires an overnight in the city before you can return. This is a significant move, allowing opportunities for employment and recreation not previously accessible to Franklin County residents by train. Numerous comments received through outreach for this RTP development indicated a desire for better intercity passenger rail connections, particularly to New York City, to enhance work and recreational opportunities. Should the pilot prove to be successful and expanded service becomes permanent, future planning efforts should focus on additional runs that could serve regional employment and workforce commuting within the Pioneer Valley.

One area of concern expressed frequently by stakeholders and potential riders is for fare equity when using the service. The fares on CT Rail’s Hartford Line are heavily subsidized by Connecticut, making travel affordable and consistent for users of the service. There are fears that the expanded pilot service between Springfield and Greenfield will not be as successful as possible because its fares are not in line with CT Rail prices and, thus, not competitive with service to the south. There are also concerns that without fare equity many potential low income riders will be priced out of the service. On-going work to establish fare equity will continue through the planning and launch of the pilot service expansion.
**Recommendations for Passenger Rail**

- Continue to coordinate and advance the implementation of a pilot program to expand passenger rail service between Greenfield and Springfield along the Connecticut River Main Line, and advocate for fare equity in its operation.

- Continue to advocate for north-south service along the Connecticut River Main Line that supports regional employment and workforce commuting.

- Continue to participate in the East-West Rail Study exploring passenger rail service between Pittsfield, Springfield and Boston that will benefit western Massachusetts residents and businesses.

- Continue to support efforts to launch an East-West Rail Study linking North Adams, Greenfield and Boston bringing employment, educational, medical and recreational opportunities to Franklin County residents.

- Continue to work with the other New England States to support and assist in creating the New England high speed and intercity rail vision, and advocate for inclusion of a Massachusetts Northern Tier east-west route in the vision.

- Continue to support the implementation of the Boston to Montreal route identified in the Northern New England Intercity Rail Initiative study, giving passenger rail access of Montreal to western Massachusetts residents and businesses.