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Passenger Rail



2024 Regional Transportation Plan

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Railroads have a long history in Franklin County dating back to the 1840s. In 1920, four separate railroad companies offered 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 three round-trip trains on weekdays and two on weekends through Franklin County. Passenger service continues to grow and provides a sustainable and essential option for travel to and from Franklin County. Expanded passenger rail service has the potential to enhance connections to employment opportunities, medical resources, cultural experiences, and recreational opportunities.

Existing Conditions

Connecticut River Main Line Passenger Rail

On December 29, 2014, Amtrak returned the Vermonter service to the Connecticut River Main Line. It travels between Washington, D.C., and St. Albans, Vermont and stops in Springfield, Holyoke, Northampton, and Greenfield once per day in each direction. It travels through Philadelphia, New York, and Springfield, MA on its route.

The Valley Flyer also provides passenger service on the Connecticut River Line between New Haven, Connecticut, and Greenfield, MA with a connection to New York City. The Valley Flyer service started as a pilot on August 30, 2019. All Amtrak services on this line were reduced during the Covid-19 pandemic, but the service resumed on July 19, 2021, and ridership numbers have grown steadily. On October 28, 2022, MassDOT and Amtrak announced that the Valley Flyer Passenger Service will be permanent. The Valley Flyer offers residents of Western MA and visitors a way to connect to Amtrak's Northeast Corridor and particularly New York City by connecting to New Haven Union Station. The Valley Flyer stops in Greenfield, Northampton, and Holyoke, and has two round-trips per day on weekdays, and one round-trip per day on Saturdays and Sundays.

Since the relocation of Amtrak's Vermonter back to the Connecticut River Main Line tracks in 2014, ridership climbed for western Massachusetts stations prior to the Covid-19 pandemic service reduction. During the pandemic Amtrak suspended Vermonter services on March 26, 2020, and resumes services on July 19, 2021. The data for 2019 is the most recent full year data; however, an examination of ridership shows that the service is currently growing back to pre-pandemic ridership. The total 2019 ridership on the Vermonter was 96,168 passengers, with thirty-five percent of that (33,779 riders) coming from western Massachusetts stations.

The ridership at stations in Springfield, Holyoke, Northampton and Greenfield nearly doubled from 2014 to 2019, growing from 17,916 to 33,779. Of the 32 stations along the Vermonter route from St. Albans, VT to Washington D.C., the top city pair for revenue and second for ridership is New York City to Northampton, MA. Greenfield to New York City comes in 7th of the 32 stations. In 2021 the top destination from Greenfield Station was New Haven with New York City second. This 2021 data for Greenfield Station includes ridership on both the Vermonter and the Valley Flyer. In 2021, Northampton and Springfield were the third and fourth most popular destinations from Greenfield. The 2019 data only accounted for ridership on the Vermonter because the Valley Flyer had just started service.

Current Activities and Future Planning

The Northern New England Intercity Rail Initiative (NNEIRI) study and MA State Rail Plan

The Northern New England Intercity Rail Initiative (NNEIRI) study, published in 2016, looked at Boston to Springfield the potential for the development of passenger service as part of a larger study of a New Haven to Montreal service. Through the MA State Rail Plan (2018) outreach, MassDOT further examined the potential for east west service and recognized that there is also interest in a higher speed rail alternative that does not need to connect with the broader service models examined through NNEIRI. Given the lack of consensus on the appropriate type of service to pursue between Western Massachusetts and Boston, and the need for a better understanding of the costs and impacts of a higher speed service, MassDOT concluded in the Rail Plan that further study of East West service was necessary. The East West Rail Study is discussed below.

East West Passenger Rail Study – Pittsfield, Springfield, Boston

MassDOT completed a study exploring passenger rail service between Pittsfield, Springfield, and Boston. MassDOT and the MBTA own the rail corridor between Boston and Worcester, which has hourly commuter rail service. However, the tracks between Worcester and the New York border 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. Currently, passenger service in the corridor is provided by Amtrak via the Lake Shore Limited, which runs one round trip per day connecting Boston and Chicago.

In January 2021, The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) completed the East-West Passenger Rail Study in follow-up to the recommendation in the State Rail Plan. The study examined the costs, benefits, and investments necessary to implement passenger rail service from Boston to Springfield and Pittsfield, with the speed, frequency, and reliability

necessary to be a competitive option for travel along this corridor. The study provided the following next steps and recommendations to MassDOT:

- Further discussion with CSX about policies for accommodating passenger rail on its right-of-way.
- Further detailed study of potentially transformative economic and demographic community benefits and impacts.
- Understand governance options for expanded passenger rail in western Massachusetts.
- Evaluation of funding sources and strategies.

Since the study, MassDOT has pursued and received federal funding to improve overall conditions in the corridor that will help eventually establish greater passenger service throughout western MA.

Western MA Passenger Rail Commission

The Western Massachusetts Passenger Rail Commission was established through an act of the Massachusetts Legislature on August 10, 2022, to investigate and receive public testimony related to the potential implementation of the east-west passenger rail service and expanded service throughout western MA. The legislature established this commission to, “investigate and receive public testimony concerning potential public entities with the ability to design, permit, construct, operate and maintain passenger rail service proposals from the East-West Passenger Rail Study Final Report.” The commission is focused on exploring potential governance and financing options to oversee the operations and maintenance of the existing and future passenger rail lines serving western MA. The FRCOG Executive Director is an appointed member of the Commission. The Commission has held a series of meetings to take public testimony during 2022 and early 2023. It is anticipated that the Commission will release a report of its findings in 2023.

Northern Tier 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. This rail corridor supported passenger rail service until 1968. The study is currently underway and is examining the costs and economic opportunities of establishing rail services between eastern and western Massachusetts along this northern route. The costs that are being studied include projected capital costs, operating costs, and revenue estimates. Projected ridership levels, community impact and benefits, and environmental impacts are also being evaluated.

A virtual public meeting was held on January 11th 2023, for MassDOT and the consultant to receive input from the public on additional service levels and potential stops to be analyzed as part of the North Tier Study. The meeting was well attended and positive comments were received that confirmed that this service would provide a critical transportation option for travel from Franklin County to Boston. This service has the potential to be transformative and have a positive economic development outcome.

The east-west rail line is owned and maintained by PanAm Southern, a joint venture between CSX Transportation and Norfolk Southern. PanAm Southern is currently upgrading its facilities for better freight movement along this line known as the Patriot Corridor. Passenger rail service from Boston's North Station currently terminates in Fitchburg at the Wachusett Station that opened in 2016.

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 a 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

While the proposed service expansion times will not support typical commuting opportunities in western Massachusetts, 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 additional intercity passenger rail connections to New York City and Boston to enhance work, access to medical resources, and recreational opportunities.

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 also concerns that without fare equity many potential low income riders are priced out of the service. On-going work to establish fare equity will continue.

Recommendations for Passenger Rail

- Continue to market the passenger rail service between Greenfield and Springfield along the Connecticut River Main Line including the Valley Flyer and Vermonter.
- Continue to advocate for north-south service and schedules that encourage interregional travel along the Connecticut River Main Line and that supports regional employment and workforce commuting.
- Explore options to offer empty seats on the Valley Flyer at discounted prices to encourage interregional and local travel on the line.
- Support the next steps and recommendation implementation of the East-West Rail Study exploring passenger rail service between Pittsfield, Springfield, and Boston that will benefit western Massachusetts residents and businesses.
- Support work on the Northern Tier Passenger 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 to Montreal to western Massachusetts residents and businesses.
- Develop options for last mile transportation connecting the passenger rail stations including Greenfield to Franklin County destinations and local transportation options.