

MINUTES
MAYOR'S COMMUTER RAIL STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING
April 16, 2002

Present:

Mayor Bernie Streeter - City of Nashua
Chris Andreason - Vermont Transit
Bryan Christiansen - City of Nashua
Dennis Coffey - HNTB
Rep. Peter R. Cote - New Hampshire General Court, Nashua
George Crombie - Director City of Nashua Public Works
Dan DeSantis - City of Nashua
Dennis DiZoglio - Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority
Kevin Flynn - WZID-Radio News
Robert W. Flynn - Northern Middlesex Council of Governments, Lowell
Bob Frey - Massachusetts Highway Planning Department
Wayne Gagne - Railroad Operations, Nashua
Nancy Girard - Conservation Law Foundation, Concord NH
Tom Greenman - Nashua Regional Planning Commission, Wilton
Peter Griffin - New Hampshire Rail Revitalization Association
Kathy Hersh - Director, City of Nashua Community Development
Donna L. Hill - EOTC, Boston
Bob Kennedy - Lowell RTA
Matt Leahy - U.S. Senator Judd Gregg's Office
Kit Morgan - New Hampshire Department of Transportation
Bill Mosher - Commuter Rail
Eileen Murley - Hampshire Chemical, Nashua
Andrew Nelson - The Telegraph
Ron O'Blenis - Parsons Brinckerhoff, Boston
Jeff Rose - U.S. Senator Bob Smith's Office
Mark Sanborn - U.S. Congressman Charles Bass's Office
Moni Sharma - Southern New Hampshire Planning Commission, Manchester
Paul D. Sharon - Town Administrator, Hudson
Andrew Singelakis - Nashua Regional Planning Commission
Cliff Sinnott - Rockingham Planning Commission
Eric Teitelman - City of Nashua Engineer
Mark Whitehead - Tyngsborough MA

Mayor Bernard Streeter opened the meeting and commended those present on the progress made thus far. Ron O'Blenis of Parsons Brinckerhoff, the state's consulting engineer for the preliminary engineering process, gave a brief overview of the engineering issues. The proposed project is the 11-mile extension of the MBTA's commuter service that currently terminates in Lowell northward to South Nashua. It will involve 6 miles of double-track, a layover facility in South Nashua, 5 grade crossings and bridge and culvert work. He stressed that the project is being viewed by NHDOT as long-term mitigation for several major highway projects, including Route 3 widening and I-93. He further explained that, due to funding constraints, the first phase of the project is intended to extend from Lowell to the selected South Nashua station. The State of New Hampshire's long term goal is to extend the service through Merrimack and Bedford and ultimately to downtown Manchester.

Currently, for the inbound service, there will be four peak morning, three mid-day, three evening and one late evening run. For the outbound service there will be one peak morning, three mid-day, five evening peak, and one late evening run. Therefore, there will be a total of 11 round trips per day.

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The station that has been selected is located at the end of Spit Brook Road on property currently owned by Hampshire Chemical Corp. There will be over 1,000 spaces. There are center aisle platform issues that need to be addressed. The passengers will need to cross tracks to gain access to the train, and as a result PB is currently evaluation tunnels versus overpasses. This is due to the need to maintain the active rail line into the chemical plant. The objective of the design is to eliminate at-grade crossings, even for maintenance vehicles

Kathy Hersh, Nashua Community Development Director, asked if it would be possible to incorporate public access to the river as part of the station design. Ron O'Blenis replied that the design would not preclude such an amenity; however, the area to be used for the layover facility would not be conducive to public access.

Ron stated that traffic studies performed by PB indicate that the site can sustain the train station without the need for significant infrastructure improvements. Andrew Singelakis, Executive Director of the Nashua Regional Planning Commission, indicated that creating a second means of access to the site via Poisson Drive should be included as part of the site design. Kit Morgan of NHDOT stated that this would be considered.

Ron stated that there are five private-grade crossings in Tyngsborough and Chelmsford that currently function as public grade crossings. The MBTA and Guilford Rail System plan to sound the train horn at these crossings as is required at similar public grade crossings. The Federal Railroad Administration has proposed a regulation that would allow the towns to petition for a quiet zone if certain safety requirements are met. The improvements to the five grade crossings will be consistent with the proposed safety requirements. Mark Whitehead, Tyngsborough Town Planner, asked that safety issues be considered specifically at these crossings.

A schedule for the completion of the project was presented. Preliminary engineering is expected to be completed by the summer of 2002, with final design commencing thereafter. Construction is expected late in 2003 to 2005, with rail equipment purchased between 2003 and 2005. Service is expected to begin in 2005.

Kit Morgan, NHDOT Bureau of Rail and Transit, stated that the total project costs, including the improvement of rail infrastructure, train station costs, and the purchase of train sets is currently at \$60-75 million. The following sources of funding have been received: \$15 million in CMAQ (including state match) for the purchase of train sets; \$8.5 million including state match for train station improvements. \$6 million (plus \$1.5 million state match) has been obtained through the New Starts program to be used toward the rail infrastructure upgrades, preliminary engineering and final design. This is halfway to where we need the project to be. \$19 million in New Starts funding is being sought, and if it is obtained, it is likely to be granted over the course of several years. With regard to the New Starts program, the project is considered to be an "exempt" project at this time, as under \$25 million is being sought through the program. Exempt projects need to satisfy the criteria of the New Starts program and do not need to compete with larger projects nationally. Funds for safety improvements will be sought through the program associated with the corridor's designation as a "high speed rail corridor."

Jeff Rose, representing Senator Bob Smith, stated that the Senator has made a request for \$15 million in New Starts funds. The results of that request will be known in September, and it is reasonable to expect the award of remaining New Starts funds over the course of the next two federal budget cycles. In addition, he stated that the Senator is committed to ensuring that the project fares well under the TEA-21 reauthorization process. He stressed that it is important that the project maintain its "exempt" status under the program.

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Mark Sanborn, representing Congressman Charlie Bass, thanked DOT, the City, PB and NRPC for their hard work on this project, and stressed that the project is a top priority for the Congressman.

Matt Leahy, representing Senator Judd Gregg, stated that the Senator is well aware that this project is a high priority for the City and State and will do everything possible to assist.

Nancy Girard, of the Conservation Law Foundation's NH Office, stated that the American Truckers Association had concerns in the hearing process for HB 2002 (The State Ten Year Transportation Plan) regarding the use of state gas tax funds as the match for new starts and CMAQ funds, and could potentially file a law suit based on Article 6A of the NH Constitution. She asked if there was a way for any other funding mechanism could be used to provide the match. Kit Morgan stated that NHDOT's position is that the use of these funds is not in violation of Article 6A, as the project contributes to the state's highway program by alleviating traffic. He was unaware of any other source of funding for the match. Nancy stated that CLF would support DOT's position.

The latest round of CMAQ provided for \$5,400,000 (including match) for three years of the operating subsidy for the service. The specific operating amount is still being negotiated with the MBTA.

Peter Griffin, NH Rail Revitalization Association, said that rail is an investment in the economic development of a community, and will make Nashua even more competitive.

Cliff Sinnott, Rockingham Regional Planning Commission, asked why double tracking was being proposed. Ron O'Blenis stated that double tracking was necessary to avoid conflict with freight and passenger operations, and that one track was already in place.

Bill Mosher of Nashua asked if the service would be going to downtown Nashua. Anything north of the Spit Brook Road station would be considered to be part of a second phase of the project that would ultimately terminate in downtown Manchester. Andrew Singelakis stated that NRPC and SNHPC would be undertaking an alternatives analysis for that second phase.

Peter Griffin asked Dennis DiZoglio of the MBTA about the status of the North Chelmsford/Tyngsborough station. He responded that the study was currently underway. They are looking at a station with 400 spaces at a site in North Chelmsford. They are projecting up to 1,000 per day by the year 2025. They are currently examining traffic impacts.

Ron stated that there would be an Environmental Assessment (EA) pre-filing agency meeting on Thursday, April 18, 2002, at NRPC's offices at 10AM. The EA needs to be approved by the FTA. A finding is expected by July.

Chris Andreason of Vermont Transit stated that his service would probably stop only at the new station rather than downtown. He stated that he is working with Amtrak for joint ticketing in areas where there are concurrent routes. Dennis Coffey of HNTB stated that the state was open to working on similar types of arrangements.

Mayor Streeter said that the next meeting will be held sometime in the summer.