

Minutes of the Friday, February 2, 2018, Public Comments  
Massachusetts Draft State Rail Plan Public Information Meeting  
held at the  
Pioneer Valley Planning Commission  
60 Congress Street, Springfield, MA 01104-3419

The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) held a public information meeting on the newly released draft Massachusetts State Rail Plan on February 2, 2018 at the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission in Springfield. The purpose of the meeting was to present a summary of the draft plan and to solicit public comment. Jennifer Slesinger, MassDOT Rail Plan Project Manager, made a presentation to approximately 100 members of the public as well as Senator Stanley Rosenberg, Senator Eric Lesser, Senator Adam Hinds, former Representative John Olver, Stephanie Pollack, Massachusetts Secretary of Transportation and Chief Executive Officer and Astrid Glynn, MassDOT Rail and Transit Administrator. At the close of her presentation, Ms. Slesinger stated that MassDOT officials will be accepting public comments through to February 19th she then welcomed questions and comments from those attending the meeting.

Senator Stanley Rosenberg began by thanking MassDOT officials for deciding to conduct this additional hearing and he noted that the large turnout indicated how much interest there is in the State Rail Plan. Senator Rosenberg commented that it wasn't so long ago that trains made it possible for people to go anywhere they wanted to go. He underscored that trains are needed to move people, goods, and services from point A to point B. Senator Rosenberg emphasized that without a robust transportation system, our economy stalls. He added that Massachusetts has an extraordinarily robust economy but it's mostly located in one region of the state. Senator Rosenberg stated that more passenger rail would add to the economic development of western Massachusetts and it would add to the state's effort to reduce its carbon footprint. Senator Rosenberg underscored the necessity of having fewer vehicles on the roads and making those on the road as fuel efficient as possible. Larger vehicles are needed to carry more people making public buses and trains all part of building and maintaining the economy and reducing the state's carbon footprint.

Senator Rosenberg remarked, "those who say we can't afford to do this, I say we can't afford not to do it." He explained that most people take out a mortgage when buying a house so that its cost is spread over 10 to 40 years. Similarly, Massachusetts residents need to realize that the high cost of additional passenger rail will also be spread out over decades. Finally, Senator Rosenberg underscored that all of us in Massachusetts need to work with our congressional delegation for progressive revenue options. He stressed that a gas tax won't be sufficient to sustain transportation needs because vehicles are becoming increasingly fuel efficient. Senator Rosenberg urged everyone to vote for the proposed Fair Share Amendment this November because its passage will result in funding for education and transportation. Senator Rosenberg then introduced Senator Adam Hinds, representing Berkshire, Hampshire, Franklin and Hampden Counties.

Senator Adam Hinds expressed appreciation to the MassDOT officials for today's meeting and he singled out Astrid Glynn, MassDOT Rail and Transit Administrator, for her work on the Berkshire Flyer, a proposed passenger train service between New York City and the Berkshires. Senator Hinds then recognized former Representative for Massachusetts's 1st District, John Olver, for his work promoting infrastructure in western Massachusetts. Senator Hinds explained that infrastructure is important because at this moment there are many small rural towns in Berkshire, Franklin, and Hampshire Counties including two in Hampden County that have

decreasing populations and are lacking in comprehensive infrastructure and high speed, broadband, internet access. Senator Hinds underscored that passenger rail is key and he underscored the importance of an east-west passenger rail as absolutely critical along with passenger service along the Knowledge Corridor. Senator Hinds then introduced Senator Eric Lesser representing western Massachusetts.

Senator Eric Lesser thanked Senator Hinds and Senator Rosenberg and he acknowledged former Representative John Olver and Representative Bud Williams. Senator Lesser stated that he appreciates that MassDOT officials understand the urgency of the proposed western Massachusetts rail projects and realize that these passenger and freight rail projects are not an extravagance as has been sometimes said in eastern Massachusetts. He underscored that the people of western Massachusetts have paid their taxes over the years to support the Big Dig and the MBTA and helped to build the economy in eastern Massachusetts while here in western Massachusetts, we're losing population and employment centers. Senator Lesser asked people in the audience to raise their hands if family members, children or neighbors with whom they attended school no longer live in western Massachusetts. Most of the attendees raised their hands. Senator Lesser reiterated that we need urgency around the east-west passenger rail study and the study needs to examine what the economy in western Massachusetts will look like in five to twenty years if the study is not completed.

Mayor David Narkewicz, of the City of Northampton, began his comments by thanking John Olver for his leadership; thanking Secretary of Transportation, Stephanie Pollack, for holding today's public information meeting at the request of Senator Stan Rosenberg and thanking MassDOT officials for the opportunity to make comments regarding the draft Massachusetts State Rail Plan. Mayor Narkewicz stated that he has been a strong advocate for expanding north-south, passenger rail service from Springfield, to Holyoke, Northampton and Greenfield. He added that he was pleased to see that expanded north-south passenger rail has been prioritized and is included in Tier 1 in the draft State Rail Plan.

Mayor Narkewicz reported that expanded north-south, passenger rail is fully supported by 2017 ridership data. He reported that the Amtrak Vermonter train with station stops in Springfield, Holyoke, Northampton, and Greenfield continues to attract an increasing number of riders for the third consecutive year surpassing initial projections. Mayor Narkewicz reported that the total 2017 Vermonter ridership for Greenfield, Northampton and Holyoke passengers is up 29% from 2015 and the combined ridership of these three cities represents 30% of the total Vermonter ridership. Mayor Narkewicz further reported that Northampton ridership on the Vermonter in 2017 was 19,974 passengers which is a 16% increase from 2016. He underscored that Northampton is now the leading stop on the Vermonter rail line excluding Penn Station and comprises 21% of the total passengers on the Vermonter rail line. Mayor Narkewicz added that the leading travel pair on the entire Vermonter rail line is Northampton and Penn Station and he noted that these positive ridership numbers far exceed the projection from the original 2009 Knowledge Corridor Study by 107%. That study projected 28 riders per day but the current ridership is 57 daily riders.

Mayor Narkewicz noted that expanded north-south, passenger rail offers many local and regional benefits including: the new Hartford rail line, a better connection to Union Station in Springfield from Hampshire and Franklin Counties, a transportation link for college students, the opening up of job markets, attracting new residents, expanding tourism, supporting the arts and cultural attractions, providing faster travel to Bradley Airport, reducing car emissions and traffic congestion. Mayor Narkewicz reported that there has already been a significant and important investment in the north-south Knowledge Corridor rail line which was the recipient of

\$75 million in federal funds (thank you, John Olver, for that earmark) and \$40 million in state funds which assisted in building stations, providing upgraded rail line, the laying of new tracks, installation of traffic switches, improvements to bridges and vehicle crossings. Mayor Narkewicz underscored that these significant and important investments were made to support expanded passenger rail traffic beyond the single trip Vermonter service. Mayor Narkewicz underscored that while the draft State Rail Plan supports funding an expanded north-south rail pilot, any such pilot should be given at least 3 to 5 years in order for it to grow successfully into a reliable and important component of our regional transportation system. Mayor Narkewicz closed his remarks by thanking the MassDOT officials for prioritizing western Massachusetts rail and for setting up today's event.

A non-elected official representing Mayor Domenic Sarno read a statement submitted by Mayor Sarno which pledged his continued support of the Massachusetts State Rail Plan and stressed that emphasis should be placed on the importance and economic significance of the north-south rail running from Penn Station to New York City, through Union Station and serving Hartford, Springfield, Holyoke, Northampton, Greenfield and into northern Vermont. The City of Springfield supports the initiatives of the Massachusetts State Rail Plan as it will act as a catalyst for economic growth in the region.

Dr. Robert Custer, former University of Massachusetts official, stated that it's great that the north-south corridor is receiving recognition and it's important that the east-west rail study will be prioritized. Mr. Schuster asked that the study consider including a stop in Palmer because thousands travel through Palmer from universities in Boston and Amherst.

Christopher Parker, Vermont Rail Action Network, indicated that the draft Massachusetts State Rail Plan represents the summation of the projects that the state of Massachusetts has on deck. By contrast, the Vermont State Rail Plan started out with a few big goals, one of which was to increase inner city ridership by 400%. Mr. Parker explained that the Vermont State Rail Plan accepted that big goal and then worked out how to accomplish it. It's a different approach than just considering projects. Mr. Parker underscored that he would like to see environmental and economic goals that are more than just maintaining the passenger rail network that we have now. Mr. Parker emphasized that he wants to understand the kinds of ridership and services being considered how environmental and economic goals can be achieved now.

Mr. Parker explained that in transportation planning, there is among most states a tendency to make the plans, invest the capital, start the trains running and then back-off. What we need, he said, is day to day leadership to champion these trains — someone in a leadership position. Mr. Parker underscored that considering there are three states involved, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Vermont, it is important that a joint power association be created that will bring together all the players and that will ensure that someone is in a leadership role as an overseer.

Emmanuel Winec, a retired resident, stressed that we consider what will happen if we don't build an east-west rail line such as the increasing congestion in Boston. Mr. Winec noted that an east-west rail line will enable eastern Massachusetts people to live in western Massachusetts where the housing costs are less and it will offset some of the economic constraints such as rent control. More importantly, he stated that people won't relocate to western Massachusetts unless passenger rail pilot studies be given at least ten years to show commitment.

Michael Baick, the State Chair for the Massachusetts High School Democrats (MAHSD) read an open letter addressed to the Massachusetts Department of Transportation which stated that although economic opportunities are booming in the Boston area, students in western Massachusetts are looking forward to an uncertain future; see less opportunities; and believe that they will have leave their communities and put down roots in the eastern part of the state where the cost of living there has sky rocketed. Mr. Baick underscored that a reliable east-west passenger rail connection is critical. Mr. Baick reported that members of MAHSD are passionate about the east-west passenger rail study and are adding their voices in support of it. He underscored that MAHSD has secured 676 signatures from 30 high schools in Massachusetts in support of the east-west passenger rail study. Mr. Baick stated that the MAHSD members are asking MassDOT and every leader in Massachusetts to join with them for the future of this generation and the Commonwealth and to work to promote east-west passenger rail.

Tanya Neslusan, Candidate for State Representative and resident of Sturbridge, emphasized the need infrastructure improvements in western Massachusetts to attract businesses. Ms. Neslusan stated that she has seen infrastructure improvements in commuter rail in Worcester and infrastructure improvements are needed here to make western Massachusetts attractive for businesses and to increase tourism.

Linda Dunlavy, Executive Director of the Franklin Regional Council of Governments, thanked Jennifer Slesinger, Astrid Glynn and the MassDOT officials for giving top priority to the expansion of the Knowledge Corridor rail services. Ms. Dunlavy stated that we in the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) along with the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission pledge to work with you to develop performance measures that will ensure that the pilot rail service will be the strongest rail service possible. Ms. Dunlavy further stated that FRCOG has already begun working with the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce on plans to market the pilot rail service. Ms. Dunlavy underscored that in order to make it a successful pilot, it needs to be three years or longer in duration in order to have time to accurately assess the program. She added that the east-west passenger rail will support our Commonwealth's economy and Governor Charlie Baker's priorities especially his recent request that every municipality should work to increase housing which involves encouraging people to move to western Massachusetts.

Ericka Roper, Transportation Planner for the Windham Regional Commission (WRC) strongly encouraged MassDOT officials to extend the north-south passenger rail project to the Town of Brattleboro, Vermont.

Donald Blais, Jr., Chair of the Town of Palmer Conservation Commission, emphasized the east-west passenger rail as a critically important long term project for the City of Palmer. Mr. Blais explained that he worries about what the Town of Palmer will look like ten years from now because its current economy is not good. He noted that the Palmer Union Station is in Tier 3 but he believes that it should be moved to Tier 2 in the Massachusetts State Rail Plan and he hopes that this will be considered.

Susan Guerin, resident of the Town of Heath, stated that she would love to take the train from Greenfield to Boston so she could voice her concerns as a Massachusetts resident. Ms. Guerin asked that small towns not be forgotten and that east-west passenger rail will greatly help the residents of the Town of Heath.

A local resident who didn't identify himself stated that "it all sounds good but how much is it going to cost and how much money will be needed to maintain it. He said that he and others spent money on the Big Dig and got taken. He added that if it's such a good idea, private companies should fund it.

Former Representative John Olver commented that most of the programs in the First Tier of the draft Massachusetts State Rail Plan concern the MBTA. Mr. Olver stated that he doesn't object and that he has always supported building good passenger rail transportation with more than 75% of Massachusetts' passenger rail lying east of Worcester and Fitchburg which are served by the MBTA. Mr. Olver commented that the Green Line was ordered 15 years during the Big Dig and it isn't finished yet. Mr. Olver underscored that it must not be understood in Boston that the City of Springfield is the second largest metropolitan area in Massachusetts. It is larger than Worcester. Mr. Olver indicated that Worcester is doing very well economically but it hasn't yet shown population growth. The Springfield metropolitan area has close to 500,000 people whereas the Worcester metropolitan area has about 300,000 people. Mr. Olver stressed that the benefits for east-west passenger service are great and the costs are great but if western Massachusetts doesn't make better passenger rail connections, we will be left behind.

Ms. Slesinger closed the public information meeting saying that the final Massachusetts State Rail Plan will be issued in the coming months and she thanked everyone for their time and feedback.