



COMMENTS FROM THE TRAIN CAMPAIGN ON THE DRAFT MASSACHUSETTS STATE RAIL PLAN March 2, 2018

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Introduction

Berkshire County is a unique and valuable asset of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, known worldwide for its natural beauty, cultural venues, and history of innovation.

The Train Campaign (<http://www.traincampaign.org>) is a volunteer organization that is a project of the nonprofit Barrington Institute. The Train Campaign is focused on bringing back passenger rail to the Berkshires. Its mission is to educate citizens and business and civic leaders about the benefits of passenger rail in rural America, and to encourage cooperation between government, business, and

nonprofit organizations to bring back efficient, economically viable rail service to serve a wide population

Vision: Rebooting the Berkshires

We envision Berkshire County (referred to here as “the Berkshires”) as having, in the years ahead, an appropriate 21st-century infrastructure for inter- and intra-regional connectivity, with the Housatonic Railroad Corridor serving as the region’s indispensable backbone.

We include within the region the Northwest Hills of Connecticut¹ and to some extent the adjoining towns of Columbia County, NY. We believe that the region's economic growth and prosperity and its future ability to sustain its natural beauty and cultural treasures will depend in large measure on having rail connections to existing and planned high-performance rail networks in New England. Consequently, we urge the MassDOT to make the following changes and additions to the Draft Rail Plan in order to ensure that the needs of present and future citizens are met:

- Move the Housatonic Line from Tier 3 to Tier 2 with the aim of stimulating new discussion with Connecticut, and undertake a study aimed at restoring passenger service, while simultaneously modernizing the portion of the line now owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to support existing jobs. This study should provide a strategic business case and full data for decision making (including benefits, costs, and alternatives).
- Include detail on what efforts MassDOT has made to discuss Housatonic Line with Connecticut, in conjunction with a commitment to interstate planning and emphasis on rail systems instead of just rail lines. MassDOT should be actively reaching out to CT, NY, VT, and other states.
- Invest in east-west train service to amplify the impact of all north-south services, and make Pittsfield (not Springfield) the final "western Massachusetts" destination in all east-west rail development.
- Complete the Berkshire Flyer study with full financial analysis and, if possible, launch the service in 2018.

Moving the Housatonic Line from Tier 3 to Tier 2

The Housatonic Railroad Corridor runs from Pittsfield, MA to Danbury, CT. The 37 miles of track in Massachusetts has been owned by the Commonwealth since 2014. It currently runs only freight service, but residents of the region are strongly in favor of continuing the initiative begun in 2014 to restore frequent daily passenger service on the line.

The reasons for favoring this line are quite simple: passenger service between NYC and the Berkshires needs to be designed to (1) attract and move a lot of people between the two end locations and

¹ Northwest Hills Council of Governments: The [NHCOG](#) is a coordinating body for chief elected officials maintained by twenty-one municipalities in northwest Connecticut.

intermediate stops and (2) to transform the economy of the region. This requires a service with multiple points of access, delivering passengers where they want to go, and strengthening town/village centers.

A study of improved East-West service and the Berkshire Flyer weekend service are included in the Plan, but the passenger service with the most potential benefit to the region has not been given appropriate ranking. In the Draft Plan Housatonic Passenger Rail Service is designated Tier 3: No current likelihood of service improvements in Connecticut.² To quote the plan:

“There has been interest in adding intercity passenger rail service in the Berkshires along the Housatonic Line between Pittsfield, Massachusetts and Danbury, Connecticut with connecting service into New York City. However, passenger service would require significant investment beyond what was initially funded when MassDOT purchased the line. The high cost of upgrades in both Massachusetts and Connecticut is a significant inhibitor as both states would need to partner for the introduction of service. However, Connecticut is not prioritizing any investments to facilitate this service and the high-cost to both Massachusetts and Connecticut, if the line were to be upgraded to passenger standards, poses a challenge.”³

We believe these conclusions and their rationale to be shortsighted and detrimental to the future well-being of Berkshire County. Housatonic Passenger Rail Service should be upgraded to Tier 2, with the aim of stimulating new discussion with Connecticut, while simultaneously modernizing the portion of the line now owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to support existing jobs. We discuss below our reasoning for making these requests.

Economic Development Objectives

The Berkshires has struggled economically for decades. To reverse this trend the region must be directly tied to the vision proposing to create a high-performance rail-based economic development strategy for the region and its mid-sized cities. This strategy will reconnect these places to the thriving economies of metro New York and Boston and link the entire region into a single housing and labor market – becoming in effect the world’s largest innovation district.⁴ Being an integral part of this district through the Housatonic Corridor will have multiple, positive impacts on the Berkshires. They include:

- **Reversing negative demographic trends:** According to the 1Berkshire, which conducted a review of Berkshire County’s 2010 federal census data, the population of the county could decline by 37% by 2030.⁵ Restoring passenger train service to metro New York will indubitably attract more people, of all ages, to the Berkshires.
- **Attracting a critical cohort:** “The county young adult population has actually gone up...explains 1Berkshire in Berkshire Benchmarks. Young Adults: 80% ENJOY LIVING in the Berkshires.”⁶
- **Providing much-needed intra-county rail service:** The Berkshires has a very “incomplete transportation network,” according to a recent study prepared for the Berkshire Regional Transit Authority.⁷

² [Mass State Rail Plan Draft](#), See Table ES-5: Long-Term Passenger Rail Projects - Tier 3

³ Ibid, See page 85

⁴ Robert Yaro, [Rebooting New England](#), 2017

⁵ 1Berkshire [Berkshire Initiative for Growth Report](#)

⁶ 1Berkshire [Berkshire Initiative for Growth Report](#)

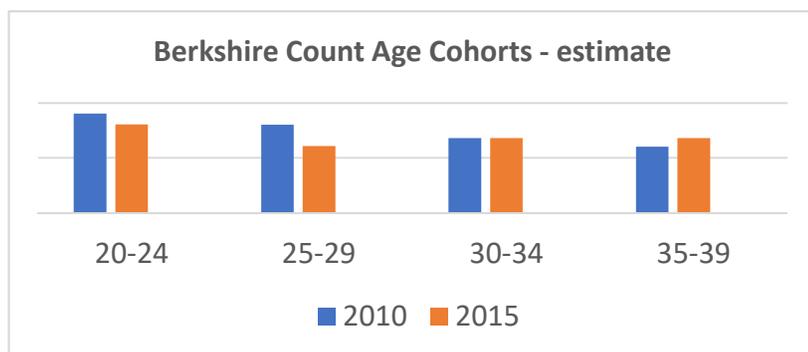
- **Producing significant economic benefits:** An estimated increase of \$625 million in additional goods and services produced and sold in the region in the first decade of the project, with this increased productivity creating an additional 610 jobs (733 during the initial construction phase).⁸
- **Stimulating “Transit-oriented development” (TOD):** TOD is the clustering of a mix of uses around rail transit stations to create vibrant neighborhoods and economically active and growing towns without infringing on the beauty of our natural environment (which is one of the region’s most valuable resources).⁹ Pittsfield, Lee, and Great Barrington are ideal towns for transit-oriented development, and have been recommended as station locations in extensive research done by the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission¹⁰. According to MassINC, “transformative TOD policy tailored to the dynamics of these markets has the potential to catalyze investment and revitalization, yielding economic, environmental, and fiscal benefits.”¹¹

Elliott Morss, among others, has argued that the “declining cost of distance” and the ability to communicate on broadband will increasingly make the Berkshires an appealing locale for high-tech manufacturers, entrepreneurs, and sole-proprietors who are home-based. Many 21st-century businesses can be located anywhere.¹²

Companies and employees, however, require connectivity. When major companies like Amazon are looking for new locations, near the top of their lists of priorities is excellent public transportation. Younger professionals also look for new forms of mobility including bike share, car services, and self-driving vehicles in conjunction with smart passenger rail.

The key demographic is the 35-39 year olds who are starting families. Fast-growing and vibrant cities like New York and Boston are increasingly expensive; younger people are being priced out, and a rural area with excellent connections will appeal to many who are looking for space and affordability. In fact, this is the one demographic that has grown over the past five years. [See chart below]. The main draws for young families include:

- HIGH QUALITY schools
- The NEW ENGLAND experience: horses, historic homes
- Large number of CULTURAL experiences year-round
- Beautiful and easily accessible NATURE
- EASY ACCESS to big cities and airports



⁷ McMaon - Prepared for Berkshire Regional Transit Authority: [Shared Ride Access to Work Study](#), 2017

⁸ Center for Creative Community Development - [Economic Benefits of Housatonic Railroad Passenger Service](#)

⁹ MassINC - [Generating more geographically-balanced growth](#)

¹⁰ [Berkshire Passenger Rail Station Location and Design Analysis](#), Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, 2014.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Elliott Morss: [The Economic Future of the Berkshires - A Reconsideration](#); Bain & Company - [Spatial Economics: The Declining Cost of Distance](#)

Good rail access to urban areas will be a huge plus in attracting this critical demographic—and in attracting employers who can offer them professional-level jobs appropriate to their career aspirations.

Supporting Local Businesses and Workers

Passenger rail to the Berkshires offers symmetrical access: increasing access to jobs and housing both inside and outside the county.

The Berkshires is widely acknowledged to have an inadequate transportation network. According to a recent study prepared for the Berkshire Regional Transit Authority,¹³ “access to transportation for low wage workers is needed for economic and workforce development in Berkshire County.” As argued by the CEO of Eastern Bank, “Incomplete transportation networks represent the most visible shortcoming in the [Gateway Cities’] infrastructure connectivity. While not the only contributing factor, limited and unreliable transportation options in underserved communities are a driving force in further widening equity and social gaps. If you can’t afford a car, and don’t have access to public transportation, how are you supposed to get to work or school to better your circumstances?”

Some of the largest employment sectors in the region, such as health services and the hospitality industry, have difficulty in filling jobs locally. At the same time, workers in the county without access to cars find it difficult to access the available jobs.”¹⁴ A reliable rail service running between Sheffield and other rural areas and Pittsfield, where many jobs are located, could be a critical component of a network of transportation providers already operating in Berkshire County that could be contracted to perform shared-ride, work-related transportation. In addition, employees with jobs in more expensive towns could commute from places with lower housing prices (this is true within the county and all up and down the line, in MA and CT, too). Older people could use the train to get to medical appointments at BMC; teenagers from Lenox could go to a movie at the Triplex in Great Barrington.

Cost-benefit and Feasibility Studies

There are two studies that have looked at potential ridership and benefits of passenger rail service in the Housatonic Corridor. According to MSR Research¹⁵ one in four residents who currently [2010] travel between two areas are highly interested in a proposed train line; it estimated annual ridership to be between 1.59 to 2.41 million. Williams professor, Stephen Sheppard, has documented the significant, potential economic impacts of passenger rail in the Housatonic corridor:¹⁶

- An estimated increase of \$625 million in additional goods and services produced and sold in the region in the first decade of the project, with this increased productivity creating an additional 610 jobs (733 during the initial construction phase).
- The increased economic activity would generate \$29.5 million in additional tax payments for Connecticut and Massachusetts in the first decade and \$55 million for the federal government.

¹³ McMahan - Prepared for Berkshire Regional Transit Authority: [Shared Ride Access to Work Study](#), 2017

¹⁴ MassINC - [Generating more geographically-balanced growth](#)

¹⁵ Market Street Research (2010) - [Projected Ridership of the Housatonic Railroad Study](#)

¹⁶ Center for Creative Community Development - [Economic Benefits of Housatonic Railroad Passenger Service](#)

- The value of residential properties located relatively near the passenger stations would rise modestly, he said, generating at least \$310 million in additional wealth for property owners and possibly as much as \$619 million.
- The reduction of traffic on roads could be expected to reduce maintenance costs by \$1.4 million in 10 years. He estimated that eight people's lives would be saved over the decade by providing rail service, with a savings of almost \$1 million of associated costs per fatality.

We realize that these projected ridership and economic benefits studies are dated and in certain ways incomplete (for example, no study has been made of demand for intra-county travel, but some residents believe that this is even more important than service to New York). A full and independent feasibility study is needed, but it can, fortunately, make use of the previous data and research design.

We believe that a Tier 2 feasibility study must include the population served in all Berkshire towns and the Connecticut towns in the Northwest Hills; it should widen its focus to include the widest range of economic and cultural impacts; it has to include a realistic estimate of costs to prepare the line for passenger service; it should be undertaken by a reliable, objective third party; and it has to be conducted in conjunction with Connecticut stakeholders.

The study should provide a strategic business case and full data for decision making (including benefits, costs, and alternatives), derived from conceptual operating plan for running the service, looking both at operating via Southeast or operating via the Danbury Branch.

We believe that there are currently Connecticut individuals and organizations that are willing and able to work with the MassDOT on the Housatonic Passenger Rail Service project; they include the Connecticut state representative for Litchfield County, the CEO of the Economic Development Association of the Northwest Hills Council of Governments and the mayor of New Milford. We are more than pleased to facilitate introductions, and have also participated in the Connecticut roundtable launching the Rebooting New England project.

Jobs Supported by Housatonic Freight Service

Upgrades to the Housatonic freight service is a perfect place to start the cooperation with Connecticut. The current freight line and improved line in the future will provide a reliable and ideal platform for transitioning to a passenger service – if it is upgraded as suggested below. The line is significant to the economies of both the Berkshires and Northwest Connecticut.

The Housatonic Line from Pittsfield down to Connecticut and points south is used for freight shipments by several local businesses and supports about 1,000 jobs. The Draft Plan reports this rail line generates almost \$200 million in economic output and \$60 million in labor income.¹⁷ It is critical that the line be maintained in a State of Good Repair so that freight service can be sustained without interruption. According to the outgoing Berkshires Regional Planning Commission CEO, the freight line supports approximately 800 jobs in Connecticut.

According to the 2012-2016 Connecticut State Plan the Housatonic Railroad Company (HRRC) handles approximately 6,000 railcars a year of commodities that include lumber, limestone, pulp, paper, and waste. This is the equivalent of approximately 24,000 truckloads. In addition to serving several large

¹⁷ [Mass State Rail Plan Draft](#): See page 17, table I-I

industrial customers and smaller shippers, HRRC also moves a considerable volume of the traffic through its bulk transfer facility located at the intersection of I-84 and Route 25 in Newtown.

Rail on the line is generally 60-100 years old. In one location, rail dates to 1876. Over the past years, HRRC has begun replacing the older, lighter weight rail with a heavier section. That work should continue, particularly on sections of its Berkshire Line that are owned by the state of Connecticut and sections of the Maybrook line that carry heavy stone trains.

HRRC requested approximately \$165 million to upgrade the line between Canaan and Danbury. See details on page 240 of the Connecticut Plan.¹⁸ These projects address upgrading and strengthening a portion of main line track in western Connecticut operated by the HRRC. And, in that plan Connecticut wrote: “The Department has an active study underway for the extension of commuter service to New Milford but has not yet taken action on the proposal for further extension of passenger service in the northwestern Connecticut region, although this corridor is worthy of a future study” Unfortunately, as far as we know neither the upgrading nor the passenger service projects have been funded.¹⁹

Improvements to freight operations will facilitate future conversion to passenger service, so we echo the Berkshire County Selectmen’s Association who have urged the DOT to plan and implement upgrades on the Berkshire line with an eye towards readiness for future passenger service and to provide more detail on what efforts MassDOT has made to discuss this with Connecticut and what that state's position is.

In conclusion, we contend that it would be inappropriate, and unfair to the present and future citizens of Massachusetts, for the Final State Rail Plan to relegate the prospect of passenger service to the 'no-action' Tier 3 without further understanding and explanation of costs and of opportunities with Connecticut. We therefore urge the MassDOT to move the Housatonic Line to Tier 2 in the final Rail Plan.

Citizen Relations and Transparency—A Few Suggestions

We believe the MassDOT could do more to encourage public participation and engender public support. For example, the following steps would be helpful:

- Publish meeting minutes and handouts for the Rail Plan meetings and other MassDOT meetings (such as the Berkshire Flyer working group meetings) online in a timely fashion.
- Publish a summary of comments received on the Rail Plan.
- Publish a PDF “Compare File” comparing the draft plan with the final plan.
- Use Eventbrite (or a similar platform) to organize public information meetings.
- Hold information meetings on-line using the same facilities that are currently used to make the MBTA FMCB and MassDOT Board Meetings accessible.
- Simplify the layout of the Rail Plan, especially in draft, so that it is easier to read and make notes on.
- Provide a comment period of at least 30 days when there is an update to a major statewide plan.

¹⁸ [Connecticut State Rail Plan: 2012-2016](#)

¹⁹ Rail Freight Program 2012- 2016 Capital Plan - [Transit Major Long Term Unfunded Initiatives](#)

Requested Changes to the Draft Rail Plan

- Move the Housatonic Line from Tier 3 to Tier 2 with the aim of stimulating new discussion with Connecticut, and undertake a study aimed at restoring passenger service, while simultaneously modernizing the portion of the line now owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to support existing jobs. This study should provide a strategic business case and full data for decision making (including benefits, costs, and alternatives).
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- Complete the Berkshire Flyer study with full financial analysis and, if possible, launch the service in 2018.

In conclusion, the Train Campaign looks forward to working with MassDOT to deliver the best possible transportation options for western Massachusetts. Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Train Campaign by:

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- Berkshire Eagle - 2015 [MassDOT buys Housatonic Railroad line between Pittsfield, Connecticut](#)
- Berkshire Eagle - 2016 [Berkshire passenger rail advocate rallies community](#)
- Berkshire Eagle - 2017 [Will we get a train to NYC? Hinds launches Senate working group to take up passenger rail from Pittsfield to the city](#)
- Berkshire Eagle 2018 - [Pop-up meetings aim to stir advocacy for high-speed passenger rail from Manhattan](#)
- Berkshire Edge 2018 - [Options now abound for potential passenger rail to the Berkshires](#)
- Series of articles on economic benefits and challenges; see [Google](#)