

Meeting Summary

Event: Public Information meeting

Date and Time: Wednesday, November 17, 2021, 6:00 PM – 8:00 PM

Location: New Hampshire Department of Transportation, 7 Hazen Drive, Concord, NH, and Zoom Webinar

1. Attendees

- In-Person Attendees: Approximately 20 people
- Virtual Attendees on Zoom Webinar: Approximately 96 people

New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT)

Patrick Herlihy
Shelley Winters

Consultant Team

Jay Doyle, AECOM
Jonathan Bruneau, Jacobs
David Derrig, AECOM
George Katsoufis, AECOM
David Nelson, Jacobs
Laura Parete, FHI Studio
Nick Campbell, FHI Studio

2. Presentation Summary

The New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT) hosted a Public Information Meeting on Wednesday, November 17, at 6:00 PM. The meeting was held in-person at the New Hampshire Department of Transportation in Concord, NH, and virtually via the Zoom Webinar platform. Patrick Herlihy of NHDOT welcomed attendees to the Public Information Meeting and introduced the project team. The purpose of the Public Information Meeting was to provide an update on the project status and obtain input from the public in the form of comments and questions. The meeting agenda included discussion of the Environmental Assessment, proposed infrastructure, the operating plan and ridership, costs and revenues, the Financial Plan, and the project's next steps.

Jay Doyle of AECOM provided an overview of how to participate in the meeting virtually via Zoom Webinar and reviewed the meeting agenda. He provided an overview of the project, its purpose, and benefits. J. Doyle stated that the project is a 30-mile extension of the MBTA Lowell Commuter Rail Line. The work currently includes development of the Environmental Assessment (EA), conceptual through 30% design of the required track, stations, and related infrastructure, and development of the Financial Plan.

David Derrig of AECOM discussed the Environmental Assessment (EA). He stated that the EA is a Federally- required document that identifies natural and man-made resources and potential project-related impacts to natural resources and people living within the project area. D. Derrig mentioned that the EA also identifies measures to avoid, minimize, or mitigate potential impacts. He discussed that Environmental Justice (EJ) considerations will be included in the EA. Jonathan Bruneau of Jacobs provided an overview of track and related infrastructure. He stated that the project will improve existing track to support commuter rail speeds, restore second track in key segments to support the Operating Plan, provide a modern signal system, upgrade existing bridges, at-grade crossings with new warning systems, and repair/replace drainage structures, switches, and sidings. J. Bruneau discussed the existing conditions of the project area.

George Katsoufis of AECOM provided an overview of the four-station concepts. He explained the operational requirements, design criteria, and the locally preferred station locations (South Nashua – Pheasant Lane Mall, Nashua – Crown Street, Bedford/MHT, and Manchester – Hybrid Option). J. Doyle discussed the locally preferred Layover Facility option. The Layover Facility is required for the operation of the extended rail service and is anticipated to be located at the Pan Am South site in Manchester. J. Doyle discussed potential noise impacts and mitigations and the scoring matrix used to evaluate the potential site. The Pan Am South site is the most efficient location due to its proximity to the end of the line. Additionally, Jay explained how the proposed layover facility could work within the City’s proposed long-range proposed street grid in the area, as depicted in the City’s Transit Oriented Development (TOD) plan.

J. Doyle referred to the “Rail Vision” plan of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA). The vision focuses on a regional rail framework for commuter rail scheduling. More mid-day trains and adjustments to service based on COVID are reflected in this schedule. The Nashua-Manchester project is proposing 44-weekday trains serving Lowell and 32 of those weekday trains continuing north and serving all four proposed NH stations. The proposed schedule offers flexible AM and PM peak as well as mid-day train service to southern New Hampshire. All AM and PM peak period trains on the Lowell Line would serve NH with this schedule, with somewhat fewer mid-day trains serving NH compared to Lowell. The proposed schedule is a balance of service strong enough to attract significant ridership while containing operations and maintenance costs. The proposed schedule has been coordinated with MBTA, and the coordination is ongoing.

J. Doyle provided an overview of the ridership forecast draft results. The forecast horizon year is 2040 and it uses the demographic forecasts of population and employment from the Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) in the study corridor. The Build forecast (with the project) shows significant ridership growth compared to the No Build (without the project) forecast for the horizon year. He provided an overview of the potential COVID-19 impact forecast on ridership based on low, medium, and high impact scenarios. Ridership is starting to come back to the commuter rail system, though is still well below pre-pandemic levels. The projections will be updated as new data on post-COVID trip making and mode choice emerges.

J. Doyle provided an overview of capital, operations, and maintenance costs. The 2014 capital cost estimate was \$246M. Since 2014, the unit costs have increased due to inflation and certain quantities have increased with the need for additional infrastructure to support the operating plan. Cost

estimating is ongoing as engineering progresses. J. Doyle stated that a project Financial Plan is being developed. He explained the objective of the Financial Plan, the approach, and the potential federal funding sources and what other states have used for the non-federal funding sources. He explained that the plan must meet the requirements of the US Federal Transit Administration (FTA). There is limited availability of discretionary Capital Investment Grants. Project selection would result in a Full Funding Grant Agreement with FTA. Local and regional consensus must be reached regarding sources and amounts of the non-federal share of project costs. The objective is to reach agreement among NHDOT, the MBTA, and other public and private stakeholders regarding the division of the non-federal share of project funding. NHDOT is not currently endorsing or recommending a specific funding source, they are just sharing information on the sources of non-federal funding used on FTA funded projects in other states across the country.

J. Doyle explained the project's next steps. The project team will continue to coordinate with federal, state, and local stakeholders, complete the Environmental Assessment, advance the engineering of the Locally Preferred Alternative, complete the cost (capital and O&M) and revenue estimates, and advance the Financial Plan.

P. Herlihy thanked everyone for attending the Public Information Meeting in-person and virtually on Zoom. The presentation and meeting summary will be posted to the project webpage.

3. Discussion

Questions

Q – Can you address how intermodal bus service will be integrated into planning?

A – There will be connections and extensions to existing bus transit routes to connect with and serve the proposed rail stations at South Nashua, Nashua, Bedford/MHT, and downtown Manchester.

Q – Has Fidelity or BAE expressed interest in a rail stop?

A – NHDOT has not heard from these parties but will be in contact with them.

Q – Have there been discussions about who is going to help pay for this project locally?

A – NHDOT has started discussions with stakeholders, and the costs (both capital and operations & maintenance) need to be determined before funding sources are identified.

Q – What is the speed that Class 4 will allow trains to travel?

A – The speed is up to 80 MPH.

Q – Does Pan Am own the track from Lowell, MA to Concord?

A – The Massachusetts Department of Transportation owns the track up to the state line. Pan Am Railways owns the track from the New Hampshire state line up to Concord, NH.

Q – If there are scheduling problems and delays, freight usually takes priority over passenger trains. Will this be the case?

A – Under the proposed project, there will be far more passenger rail traffic on the line than freight traffic. About ten years ago the MBTA negotiated to have commuter rail trackage rights on the Pan Am Railways line up to Concord, NH.

Q – Is the ridership forecast per day?

A – Yes, the forecast shown in the presentation is for weekday passenger boardings in the planning horizon year 2040.

Q – How will the pending merger of CSX and Pan Am Railways impact the project?

A – The merger application is currently pending at the federal level with the Surface Transportation Board. NHDOT and the project team has had initial discussions with CSX to make them aware of the proposed project. CSX has stated that all existing Pan Am Railways' agreements would be honored. This includes the MBTA trackage rights agreement that was mentioned earlier.

Q – Are there potential Amtrak improvements considered in this project?

A – Members of the project team have had initial discussions with Amtrak. Amtrak wants to extend service north to Concord, NH with their intercity rail service. However, this project is currently looking at the MBTA Commuter Rail service as far north as Manchester and as per the charge from the NH Legislature and Governor.

Q – Is the parking at the stations going to be free or will you have to pay?

A – A specific price has not been determined. It is anticipated there will be a fee for parking to help fund the project and ongoing maintenance costs. This will be outlined in the Financial Plan.

Q – Has there been a discussion about maintenance costs for the rail line between Massachusetts and New Hampshire?

A – Fare revenues are expected to cover a portion of the Operations & Maintenance (O&M) costs after the capital improvements are made to enable implementation of the service. The Financial Plan will address the specifics of who will be responsible for different elements of the O&M cost.

Q – Why are there no express train options to get people to and from Boston?

A – There may be opportunities as this project and service moves forward for express trains. Right now, during COVID, MBTA is not running express trains on the line.

Q – Will construction of the stations and the Layover Facility impact abutting property owners?

A – The project team recognizes that there are neighborhoods adjacent to the railroad tracks. A noise study is underway to identify potential noise impacts and help determine potential mitigation measures.

Q – Has the project team consulted municipalities and stakeholders in the area?

A – The project team has been coordinating with the cities of Nashua and Manchester, Manchester-Boston Regional Airport, the Nashua Regional Planning Commission, the Southern New Hampshire Regional Planning Commission, local elected officials, key stakeholders, and the public regarding the potential station locations and layover facility.

Q – Have there been discussions about parking for the stations? Will there be chargers for electric vehicles?

A – Yes, there have been early discussions about shared parking, which lots, how many spaces, and what the arrangements will be. During the design process, consideration will be given to the inclusion of electric charging stations as well as bicycle and pedestrian facilities, and other parking & passenger amenities. ADA accessible parking spots, bicycle facilities, and other parking features.

Q – With the freight driver shortage, will freight trains play a larger role in distribution?

A – The track and other infrastructure improvements associated with the project will help freight trains to travel more efficiently along the rail line.

Q – Which areas will be double-tracked as part of this project?

A – The design incorporates double tracking from the Chelmsford wye (northward) to three miles north of Lowell Station in MA. The second major area of proposed double track begins south of the Bedford/MHT Station and extends to the downtown Manchester station. Nashua's double-track is mostly central to the station proposed Crown Street station area.

Q – Are the tracks going to be electrified?

A – There is a pilot program that's looking at this right now on just a few of the MBTA lines to determine the feasibility. Currently, there are no plans to electrify the Lowell Line that is part of this project.

Q – How does the infrastructure money impact this project?

A – NHDOT knows we will be getting additional transit funding. It's too early to determine how this will impact the project. The funding increase in the Capital Investment Grant Program will help given the competitive nature of the discretionary program.

Q – Does your plan include buying new train cars and equipment?

A – At present, we don't anticipate that more rail coaches will be required, nor do we anticipate that any additional locomotives would need to be purchased.

Q – What is the weekend train schedule?

A – The project team has not created a service schedule to economize on the expanded service. This is still in the development phase and there is potential for this to be added later and will be discussed with the MBTA.

Q – What's the car parking situation for the (downtown) Manchester Station?

A – The Manchester Station is seen as less of a park and ride type station and therefore parking is not provided as part of this project. The station is expected to be more of a walk/bike, drop-off, and transit access station. The TOD plan may provide opportunities for additional parking in the area in the form of existing or future parking garages or surface parking.

Q – Are bridges being improved and clearances made higher?

A – A bridge analysis is being conducted to determine if upgrades are necessary to the rail line. None are expected because passenger trains, even with bi-level coaches, have lower vertical clearance requirements compared to freight.

Q – Can the wastewater treatment area in Manchester be used for the Layover Facility?

A – The project team did evaluate this site. The site was not wide enough to accommodate the storage needed for the operation.

Q – How many at grade crossings are there and do any of them need to be grade separated?

A – There are 21 grade crossings. There are about 7 in Massachusetts and the rest are in New Hampshire. No grade separations are planned as part of this project.

Other Public Comments

- There was a comment that NHDOT shouldn't be encouraging people to travel to Boston when there are jobs in New Hampshire.
- The future of transportation may be different than what is being proposed in this project.
- Locals use Moore's Bridge (in the Bedford-Manchester area) as a pedestrian crossing. It might be good to preserve this as pedestrian access.
- Covered bicycle parking should be incorporated into the station designs.
- Consider improving the Nashua Spit Brook Road exit near the proposed Pheasant Lane Mall Station to make traffic flow better through this area.
- A member of the public expressed that the Pan Am South location for the Layover Facility is the best option for this site.
- Transit service is necessary for travel from the MHT/Bedford Station to Boston and the surrounding areas.
- A member of the public expressed support for the project.
- A member of the public stated that drainage structures and the sewer system need to be upgraded along the rail line.
- A weekend schedule would benefit the citizens of New Hampshire.