

NEW HAMPSHIRE STATE RAIL PLAN



NOVEMBER 2023

New Hampshire
DOT
Department of Transportation

RAIL ADVISORY COUNCIL NOTES

Background

The success of a State Rail Plan lies in the ability to build consensus and support across a range of rail stakeholders. Convening a Rail Advisory Council (RAC), comprised of a range of public- and private-sector rail stakeholders, is intended to establish a forum for collecting this input as the plan develops. The RAC will convene three times throughout the development of the New Hampshire Rail Plan to provide feedback on the vision, goals, trends, needs, opportunities, and recommendations. The focus of the first meeting, held virtually on November 1, 2023, was to review the project workplan and to solicit feedback on the plan's vision, goals, and objectives.

Attendees

Rail Owners or Operators

- » Joseph Barr, Amtrak
- » Scott Bogle, Rockingham Planning Commission
- » Andy Fast, UNH Cooperative Extension
- » Luke Irvine, Amtrak
- » Mary Anne Michaels, Vermont Rail System
- » Maurice O'Connell, CSX
- » Will Roseborough, CSX
- » Mike Sliper, CSX
- » Dave Swirk, Conway Scenic Railroad
- » Charles Hunter, Genesee & Wyoming

NHDOT and State of New Hampshire

- » NHDOT
 - Maggie Baldwin (Bureau Administrator, Bureau of Rail & Transit)
 - Louis Barker (Railroad Planner, Bureau of Rail & Transit)
 - Andre Briere (Deputy Commissioner)
 - Lucy St. John (Senior Planning, Bureau of Planning & Community Assistance)
 - Shelley Winters (Director of Division of Aeronautics, Rail & Transit)
- » New Hampshire Regional Planning Commission
- » New Hampshire Municipal Association
- » New Hampshire Department of Business and Economic Affairs
- » Benoit Lamontagne (North Country Industrial Agent)
- » Moe Langlois (Manchester Sand & Gravel)
- » NH Department of Natural and Cultural Resources
 - Sarah Stewart, Commissioner

Consultant Team

- » Leah Pickett, Cambridge Systematics

- » Andreas Aeppli, Cambridge Systematics
- » Christian Higgins, Cambridge Systematics

Presentation

The agenda for the RAC presentation was as follows:

- » Welcome and Introductions
- » Plan Overview and Approach
- » Rail Trends and Discussion
- » Stakeholder Outreach Summary and Discussion
- » Vision and Goals Discussion
- » Discussion and Next Steps

The following sections describe the material presented, discussion, and selected poll results from each portion of the presentation.

Welcome and Introductions

The meeting commenced with NHDOT's Maggie Baldwin providing opening remarks. NHDOT is undertaking this rail plan update to meet federal guidelines and to support future planning, policies, and investments across the state. The updated State Rail Plan will include an examination of existing freight, passenger, and tourism railroad conditions, future conditions, and corresponding system needs related to projects, policies, and strategies.

The development of the State Rail Plan will be guided by stakeholder engagement, including interviews with representatives from the state's railroads, as well as through the Rail Advisory Committee (RAC), comprised of private and public sector stakeholders. This first RAC meeting is meant to discuss the vision and goals for the rail plan, as well as general trends impacting rail operations in New Hampshire.

Plan Overview and Approach

The team provided an overview of the purpose of the Rail Plan update, including the following key aims of the effort:

- » Update the New Hampshire State Rail Plan to meet all federal guidelines and support future planning, policies, and investment in the state
- » Gather freight and passenger rail data, assess the existing and future conditions on the rail system, and identify needs and opportunities
- » Conduct a robust stakeholder engagement effort

- » Identify and prioritize projects, policies, and strategies to support rail-related goals
- » Develop a framework to examine proposed alternative uses for rail assets that are currently dormant

The team also provided an overview of the plan schedule and of the technical approach. The technical approach is based on three key questions:

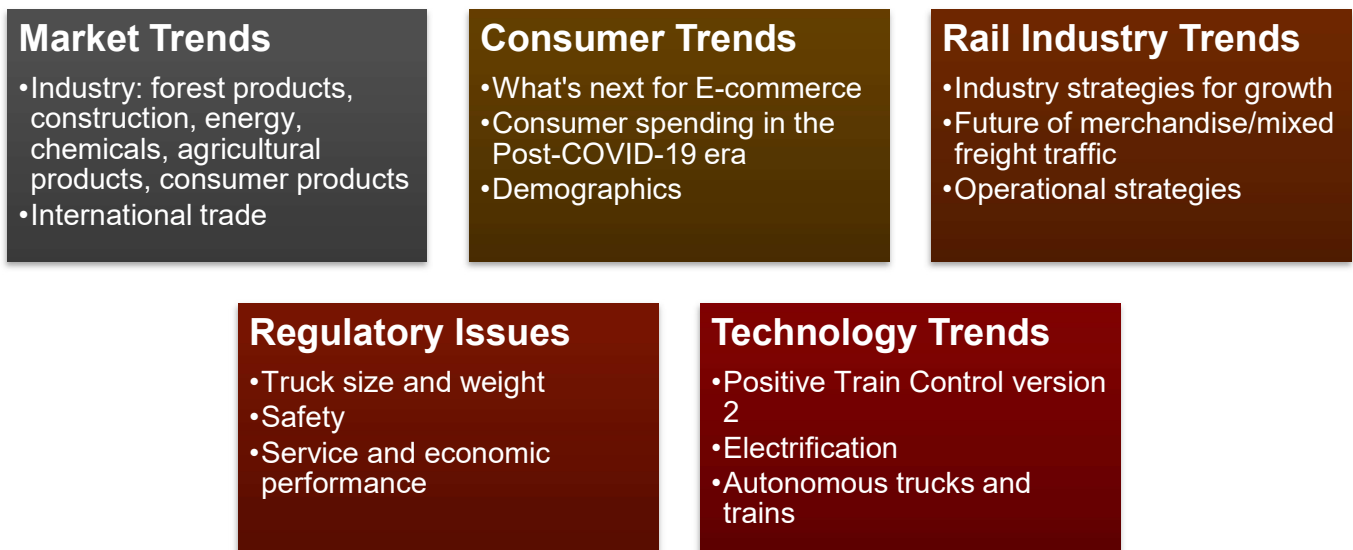
- » **Where are we now?** What we need to know to make decisions and invest in our system?
- » **Where do we want to go?** What vision, goals, strategies and investments to help us get there?
- » **How do we get there?** What are the key strategies that will get us there?

The research outputs flowing from each of these exploratory questions form the basis of the State Rail Plan.

Rail Trends

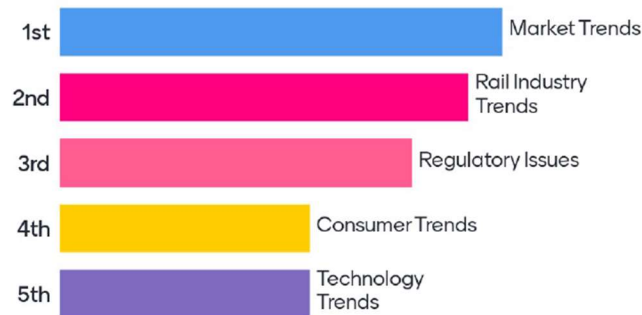
This portion of the presentation included a discussion of current trends impacting rail in New Hampshire (Figure 1). The purpose of this portion of the presentation was to solicit feedback on any additional trends RAC members have observed in New Hampshire in recent years.

FIGURE 1 RAIL TRENDS



The team solicited feedback on the anticipated significance of these trends in New Hampshire in the future (Figure 2). Overall, attendees see market trends (e.g., industry trends and international trade) and rail industry trends (e.g., operational strategies, future of merchandise) as most impactful to statewide rail service and trends. Attendees also anticipate technology and consumer trends will be less impactful to the industry overall.

FIGURE 2 POLL – RANK TRENDS IN TERMS OF HOW SIGIFICANT AN IMPACT THEY WILL HAVE ON RAIL SERVICE IN NH IN THE FUTURE.



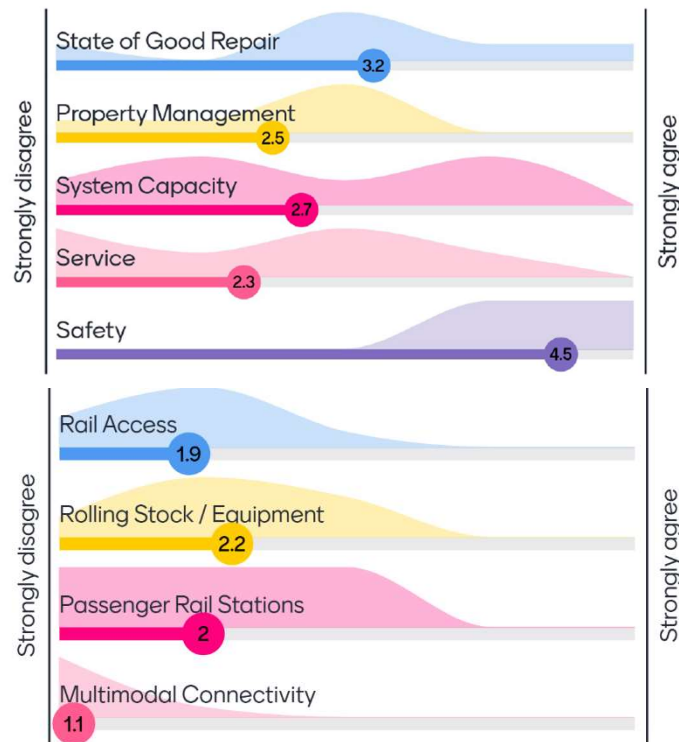
Stakeholder Outreach

The team provided an update on stakeholder outreach efforts to date. These outreach efforts have included interviews with rail carriers, advocacy groups, and industry personnel. While additional stakeholder outreach remains, below are summaries of key trends, needs, and opportunities identified for freight, passenger, and tourist rail during the RAC meeting:

- » **Freight rail:** There is potential for rail to grow its market share in the transport of forest products, but there are continuing reliability issues in freight transportation. Key freight rail needs include:
 - Additional capacity (generally across New England as well)
 - The need to bring the entire rail network up to 286k standard
 - Development of transload sites in New Hampshire
 - Additional wood fiber cars for capacity purposes
 - Statewide double-stack clearance
 - Increased track capacity on Portland-Haverhill route to better facilitate freight and *Downeaster* passenger trains; It was recommended that NHDOT pursue CRISI grants to fund some of these efforts
- » **Passenger Rail:** Ridership has fully recovered along Amtrak's *Downeaster* since the COVID-19 pandemic. There continues to be strong support for passenger rail among business community. However, there is some political opposition to developing passenger rail to Nashua and Manchester. Key passenger rail needs include:
 - Improved and additional amenities at stations in New Hampshire
 - General demand for increased intrastate and interstate travel needs.
- » **Tourist/Excursion Rail:** Tourist rail operations are seen as an area for potential future growth. There are opportunities to expand tourist ridership with enhanced first-class offerings, optimized schedules, and extended seasons.

The team asked respondents to assess how well the New Hampshire rail system is performing in relation to multiple core areas (Figure 3). Respondents ranked safety and state of good repair as the areas performing the best. Multimodal connectivity, rail access, and passenger rail stations all averaged a rating of either a two or below.

FIGURE 3 POLL – NEW HAMPSHIRE’S RAIL SYSTEM/SERVICE IS PERFORMING WELL IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS



Overall, the rail system is performing best in the core areas of safety and state of good repair. For trends that received lower ratings, NHDOT discussed challenges associated with resource constraints, including financial and staffing challenges. The Bureau of Rail and Transit has capacity to carry out core functions, but faces resource constraints when it comes to interacting with shippers to fully discern needs.

Vision and Goals

The vision and goals form the foundation of the State Rail Plan development. The vision for the State Rail Plan covers a time horizon of approximately 20 years. The goals for the State Rail Plan development should balance the needs of freight, passenger, and tourist railroads through a coordinated public and private sector approach. The vision from the 2012 NH State Rail Plan is as follows:

The New Hampshire rail system is one that provides an efficiently utilized and well-maintained railroad system, expanded as appropriate to accommodate increases in freight and passenger demand for rail services. It is a system that is fully integrated with the national, regional and statewide transportation system, connecting the state's urban and rural communities, maximizing the opportunities for economic growth, promoting energy efficiency, and providing safe, secure and reliable transportation of people and goods.

The goals from the 2012 NH State Rail Plan are as follows:

1. Maintain the New Hampshire rail system in a state of good repair.
2. Provide a rail system that is financially stable and sustainable.
3. Expand the rail system and its capacity to promote growth in freight and passenger demand.
4. Provide a rail system that is environmentally supportive and sustainable.
5. Facilitate the ability of New Hampshire railroads to be competitive regionally, nationally, and globally.
6. Support economic initiatives.
7. Realize public benefits for public investments.
8. Encourage public-private partnerships related to rail services.
9. Educate New Hampshire residents and businesses on the rail system in New Hampshire.

Participants were asked to provide input on how the vision statement and goals should be modified for this iteration of the Rail Plan. This feedback, contributed in the form of short answer responses, will be incorporated into the vision and goals moving forward.

Next Steps

The meeting concluded with a plan for next steps from the team. This includes the following expected tasks and milestones:

- » Continue developing technical material (Spring 2024)
- » Finalize vision and goals (Winter 2023)
- » Finish stakeholder interviews (Fall 2023)
- » Conduct first round of public meetings (Spring 2024)
- » Next RAC meeting (Spring 2024)