

Knowledge Corridor Passenger Rail Study

January 2009 Newsletter

Issue 1

About the Study

The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC), with support from the Vermont Agency of Transportation, is leading the Knowledge Corridor Passenger Rail Study, which is examining possible future rail options within the study area (see map). The study intends to develop an action plan for improving speed, maximizing access, and providing viable transportation alternatives. Key objectives are to improve mobility and spark economic development.

The Knowledge Corridor describes the cluster of communities between Springfield, Massachusetts and White River Junction, Vermont located along I-91 within the Connecticut River Valley. The communities consist of a mix of high-density and more rural areas that feature a multitude of important cultural, educational, business, and medical facilities.



Expansion of rail services along the Knowledge Corridor could provide significant economic revitalization and investment. The study will evaluate effects on traffic and congestion. As gas prices continue to fluctuate, it could provide an affordable travel option for the communities along the line.

The Plan

The study has three major components:

Aspect 1: Move Amtrak service to the Connecticut River Line

Currently, Amtrak's Vermonter service makes one trip in each direction daily between St. Albans, Vermont and Washington, D.C. via Springfield, Massachusetts and New Haven, Connecticut (see map). The Vermonter route now travels on CSX Railroad east of Springfield to Palmer, then on the New England Central Railroad north to the Amherst station, then to East Northfield, and through Vermont to St. Albans. This study will examine the feasibility of routing the Vermonter to the existing Pan Am Railways Connecticut River line (in red on the map) between Springfield and East Northfield. While this would end service to the Amherst station, the new alignment would speed the trip to Vermont and serve the Holyoke, Northampton, and Greenfield communities.

Aspect 2: Evaluate Commuter Rail Options

The study will evaluate future commuter rail options for the line between Springfield and points north (including Holyoke, Northampton, and Greenfield), including evaluating market demand, existing conditions, and identifying desirable station locations. Integration with a related project by ConnDOT, which is examining commuter service between New Haven and Springfield, will be evaluated.

Aspect 3: Look at Intercity Service

Another part of the study will evaluate current and future intercity travel options, such as enhanced intercity rail service. The successful Portland to Boston Downeaster Service will be considered as an example to evaluate in the Knowledge Corridor. In addition, related High Speed Rail initiatives and studies, including segments from Springfield to Boston, Albany to Buffalo, and service to Montreal will be considered in evaluating future options for the I-91 Knowledge Corridor rail services.

Project Meetings

Partnering Session

On June 26, 2007, the study team held a Partnering Session to form an alliance of stakeholders, agencies, and companies to work together to deliver a quality plan that will provide the best recommendations for the communities they serve. The partners committed to work towards achieving several goals and objectives involving planning, sustainability, livability, and economic development. The presentation from this session is available on our website.

Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) Meetings

The study's TAC is comprised of various agencies, experts, and organizations that represent the public and interests within the study area. TAC meetings are held to review study progress, build consensus, solve technical challenges, and ensure the quality of the project as it moves forward. The TAC has met twice, on September 24, 2008, and on November 19, 2008, to discuss technical issues relating to the development of the Knowledge Corridor Study. The first meeting outlined the purpose and need, route, related projects, and provided an early summary of the travel market demand and economic development analysis. A video tour of the route was given to better understand the physical condition of the existing Connecticut River rail corridor from Northfield to Springfield. The second meeting examined in greater depth the economic and ridership development factors, as well as provided an overview on early operations planning.

Presentations from both meetings are available on our website.

Economic Development

Can restored and enhanced passenger rail be an important component of efforts to revitalize the Pioneer Valley's economy? Can transit-oriented development (TOD) efforts be successful in generating more jobs, residents and ultimately ridership? What are the opportunities, constraints, and timing for economic development growth in the four proposed station cities in Massachusetts - Greenfield, Northampton, Holyoke, and Springfield? To begin to evaluate these questions, the project team has taken three key steps:

- › Interviews have been held with economic development experts from 12 organizations in the Pioneer Valley to assess the context for development opportunities and to gather relevant data on development initiatives.
- › Detailed data has been gathered on land use, population and employment trends, and relevant studies of passenger rail and economic development have been reviewed.
- › A risk-based modeling methodology was developed to estimate square feet of development, jobs and population while accounting for uncertainty in key variables and assumptions.

The resulting analysis generated preliminary estimates of increased economic development potential as a result of new and/or enhanced rail service in the four station cities – as well as the impacts on Franklin, Hampshire and Hampden counties.

The preliminary draft results were presented to the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) on November 19 for review and feedback. As a follow-up, the project team is preparing a workbook of key modeling data, factors and assumptions for detailed review by the TAC in early 2009. The model and results will be refined based on this stakeholder feedback and used as input to the ridership and cost-benefit analysis of the rail service alternatives.

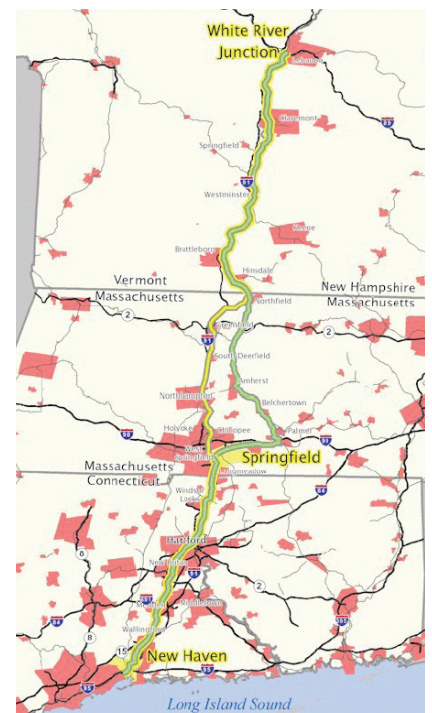
Next Steps

The TAC will continue to meet in the coming year as ridership estimates, costs and benefits of different scenarios, and operations scenarios are refined.

The project team expects to conduct public meetings in the spring of 2009 to present findings and solicit feedback.

Get Involved

- › Visit the project website at www.pvpc.org/corridor/ to sign up for the mailing list.
- › Forward this newsletter to colleagues and interested parties!



For more information about the project, please contact Dana Roscoe, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, at (413) 781-6045 or email droscoe@pvpc.org.

Visit: www.pvpc.org/corridor/