

MINUTES SUBJECT TO CORRECTION BY THE VERMONT RAIL COUNCIL. CHANGES, IF ANY, WILL BE RECORDED IN THE MINUTES OF THE NEXT MEETING OF THE COUNCIL.

**VERMONT RAIL COUNCIL
MINUTES OF MEETING
DILL BUILDING A
2178 AIRPORT ROAD
BARRE, VERMONT
March 16th, 2023**

***Hybrid meeting**

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Carl Fowler	Charlie Moore (via Teams)
Arthur (Art) Whitman	Joann Erenhouse (via Teams)
David Allaire	
Charles Baker (via Teams)	

ATTENDEES:

Amy McCaffrey, VTrans	Deb Fox, Vermont Rail Action Network
Jason Owen, VTrans	(VRAN) & Finger Lakes
Dan Delabruere, VTrans	Charlene Lovett, Claremont Train Host
Kyle Wells, VTrans	Assn.
David Tillberg, VTrans	Selden Houghton, VRS
Percy Bannerman, VTrans	Bill McDonald, Retired Conrail

ATTENDEES VIA TEAMS:

Ben Heckscher	Dave Wulfson, VRS	Peter Young (Guest)
John Madden	Charlie Moore, All	Mark Fitzgerald,
Mary Anne Michaels	Earth Rail	VTrans
Natale, Christopher M,	Sasa Dejan, VTrans	Paul Libby, VTrans
Rockingham	Neaderland, Zoe	Renee Layton, VTrans
Development	Scott Burbank	John Nummy, VTrans
Charles Hunter	Karen Songhurst,	Toni Clithero, VTrans
Dan Peacock	VTrans	Costa Pappis, VTrans
Dan (Guest)	Wilson, John	
David Blittersdorf	(Manchester, NH)	

1) Call to Order & Introductions

Dan Delabruere called the meeting to order at 1 PM. Introductions were done. We are recording meeting Dan said after Carl's corrections to minutes.

2) Approval of Previous Minutes

Previous Minutes from December 15th, 2022

MOTION by Arthur Whitman, **SECOND** by David Allaire, **to approve the minutes of 3/24/22 as presented.**

Carl Fowler had some corrections - recent member should be memory pg 2. Spelling – Ben Heckscher x 2. on page 2. Page 3 speed reduction related to head down from 79 (not “down to”). Page 4, 1/3 from top. Pot of money in bill law for investing in infrastructure could possibly be used across border. Pot could be used for opening previously closed routes.

Dan, said for approval of minutes as corrected: raise hand if don't want to approve the minutes. With no hands raised, all approved. Moved into approved minutes.

3) Passenger Topics

Toni C. Passenger data shown as 5 months compared to benchmark. Performing strongly and up 28% in Nov. That was a big increase. These are our favorite months. Ridership starts to fall in December. 28 % in November harbinger of things to come, Toni said. We've pretty much been tracking what had in FY 19. Numbers looking pretty good. Bill has question on Vermonter's numbers. What are we doing to grow ridership? For New York is 2 hours longer than driving. Dan D. responded if look at chart does show increase. Steadily increasing. We have pretty intense marketing campaigns with Amtrak and VT Tourism folks. We've invested a lot of money over years to cut run time down. We've done it, so has CT and MA. We've cut hour or more off run time in just last couple of years. Not a one thing we've been doing, but bunch of things. No question that next big bubble will be going to Montreal. But there's a lot of work to get there. Currently project to upgrade signals south of Brattleboro which will improve run time. Station upgrades that will attract passengers. Montreal will be the big thing.

Bill MacDonald– was very rare that patient in dental practice would think of using the train. Who wants to get to NY at 6:30 in the evening. Don't connect to any trains (#19 & #95). Only go to Washington and that's it. We should leave later on Sunday.

Dan D. Will tell you if talk to 100 different people get 100 different schedules. Can't make anyone happy. Marketing and research have gone into the schedule. Changing it also is huge with all the dominos that have to fall. So that's huge. When we go to Montreal, will we look at schedule again. I'm sure we will, but not right now.

Dave Allaire– I want to interject. We're still car-centric in this country and will take a long time incrementally to grow ridership to where we want to see it. A second train would be a huge boost to accommodate different schedules and travelers.

3 a) Ridership report

Toni C. Incredible increase month after month. When look at chart looks like two different services. With Burlington added almost 7K so wiping out concerns we may have had with losses in ridership at Essex Junction. Decreases at Rutland and Castleton means these riders are no longer commuting and are catching their home town train. Note for ALB/BTN that added 665 additional riders for this line.

Carl Fowler comments. Positive comments about sculpture and performance. Agrees what really need is Montreal.

3 b) Brattleboro VT, Station Update

Ellen Pannell -Amtrak Stations Program, gave a presentation on the improvements to the Brattleboro train station. She talked about development, including challenges for the project. To meet ADA requirements for a track also running freight, the length of the platform would have been limited. They were able to get a 345 ft concrete platform by reworking track and switches near the station, as well as moving the station location to East side. Platform will include electric snow melt system. Ellen went over layout and amenities of the new station. Easement agreements finalized. Bidding expected Spring 2023, with construction start expected late Summer 2023.

Dan D. This is great presentation. First full-length level boarding platform. Great example of if you can, this is how you do it. It is going to be a beautiful station. Great example of amenities that are going to draw ridership.

Carl Fowler what's total budget on this project? Ellen didn't have off hand, but said couple million. Thrilled with beautiful design.

Overflow parking over by river part of initial plan, or subsequent construction. Ellen responded, didn't exist at start of project, but town created this as realized parking issues.

Carl Fowler – any of these spaces for riders staying more than one day?

Ellen – No. There is a parking garage in town that allows for overnight parking.

Bill McDonald - Looks really nice. Will increase ridership no question. There's going to have to be interlockings. Ellen, already done. Can we save money by using same design as for Rutland?

Dan D. – this is whole new design. This is done and out ready to be bid. It is similar to Rutland design.

Deb Fox– Question about parking. Should be dedicated parking. Who is station ownership?

Dan D. – Ownership Will be Amtrak. Will be only Amtrak-owned in VT. This was funded through Amtrak station program.

4) Freight and Construction Topics

4 a) Project Updates – Paul Libby, VTrans

Paul Libby - In design phase this time of year. Spoke about changes to Rail and Aviation Bureau team of project managers. Still some vacancies. Before and after of Crossing maintenance. Went over FRA Build grant and some other work. Highlighted bridge in Cavendish and another in Montpelier near Shaws. Then back to some condition improvement projects for Crossings on the WACR - Montpelier & Barre. Several challenging sight distance issues.

4 b) Project Update CWR – CLP Selden Houghton, VRS

Selden shared active projects VRS has done recently and what is planned for this year. Working a lot of the CLP. Lot of issues have are ledge that impact train speed. Ledge removal projects are being done

this year. 9 spots of CLP. Few of the VTR. 13 Crossing protection upgrades on the CLP. Hope to have contract in place soon to do tie work then CWR on CLP. Approx 6 miles worth of JR. This will make completely CWR from Rutland to Whitehall. Vegetation removal. 16 locations and over 9K feet of stabilization projects on the VTR (Ethan Allen extension). This got rid of remaining slow orders on route to Burlington. With all the changes project 10 minutes of time savings in run time on the CLP.

Carl Fowler applauds helping train times. Hopes to get down to a 7-hour schedule.

Dan D- agrees all adds together and every minute counts. Selden has highlighted safety projects, but also helps with run times as well.

Bill McDonald, Have we talked about boosting NY to Albany speeds. Dan D. – Yes, we have conversations about the entire network & talk with NY but won't speak for them here.

5) Governors Recommended Rail Budget

Dan D. – Spoke about Governors recommended budget for Rail. Last year somewhere around \$35 M. This year around \$43M. Budgets go up and down year to year. Amtrak project is placeholder for study. Went through budget line by line. Some of these covered by Paul Libby in his project update. Burlington crossing moved up to line up with Burlington sidewalk upgrades by municipality. Hartford to Coventry, grant application money to get all those bridges up to 286k, as there is grant opportunity coming up. In Hoosick NY rebidding 3 bridge projects that are part of a BUILD program. Bridge 57.5, 21-day closure. Large, deep culvert and very complicated.

Carl Fowler is federal contribution BUILD or ongoing at bottom of page 2? Dan D. – What we have successfully worked on last couple of years is there is flexibility in CMAC funding. We have flexed some of this CMAC funding which is federal into Amtrak operating costs.

Bill McDonald – What's revenue for Amtrak? Dan D. – we aren't in business of running trains so don't have idea what private railroads take in.

Bill M. . - Looks like lot of deferred maintenance.

Dan D. – One thing we should explain is we don't do day to day maintenance in these projects. These are specific to upgrading infrastructure we own. We lease to VRS and they do day to day maintenance.

David Allaire any projects previously accounted budget wise not in this budget? Dan D. – Not in next years project will get done another year. We had to do complete re-evaluation of how we prioritize crossing projects with FRA.

6) Operation Lifesaver

Toni C. – Still haven't had any injuries, but we have had incident Monday Feb 27th. Tractor trailer full of stone got in middle of crossing and had accident with train. Doing a lot of online work and PSA development. New England RR Club tech conference in St Albans picture of event. Attendance round 50 people.

7) Public Input

Dan D. – New Rail council member Representative Sarah Coffee will be joining the council as replacement.

Bill McDonald – Montreal how will change schedule? Dan D. – No serious discussion about it so far, but is a ways away.

Bill M. - Speed restrictions on CN border to Montreal? Dan D. – I talked about studies that will identify all those items (condition of track, everything). Certain things have to happen so train does not stop. All this has to be put down on paper.

Charlene Lovett - Most popular route is from Claremont to NY. Can this route be included in the report to the council?

Dan D. – We have ridership for all stations. We can give you specific one.

Charlene Lovett - Want to highlight 30% increase they have seen due to at station hosts (want to applaud). Would like to applaud work at Claremont station . Been degradation of concrete there and paint. Could we schedule someone to come take a look at and possibly repair?

Dan D. – Have to look at who owns it as lot of different owners involved.

Deb Fox – VRAN is non-profit doing YouTube videos to highlight rail. Have done Bellows Falls station. Would love to do Claremont to highlight updates there. I would like to propose bud cars presentation being used in ME. Lot of trials, tribulations and possibilities.

Dan D. – Making note of that.

Art – Appreciate work on crossings, like to take look at Perron Rd crossing on 67. Doesn't come in at 90 and is very rough.

Bill McDonald – Any possibility of extending Valley Flyers up from Brattleboro?

Dan D. – Short answer yes has been discussed but leaving it there for now. On radar, comes up often.

Bill M – Possible eliminate delay using electric power?

Dan D. – It's going to be solved with new equipment.

8) Next Scheduled Meeting

Next Meeting: Thursday June 15, 2023, 1 PM – 3 PM

Dan D. - Same building. Try to get bigger room. Will be hybrid virtual meeting as well.

9) Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 2:59 PM.