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Commuter rail plan calls for Concord stop

Differing proposals hinge on fed funding

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A proposed commuter rail from Boston to New Hampshire could potentially extend as far north as Concord, according to a plan drafted by Pan Am Railways.

But the implementation of the plan is far from certain. Pan Am is still negotiating with the New Hampshire Rail Transit Authority over the makeup of a potential commuter rail, and the transit authority's proposal would only take it as far as Manchester. Also, before any railroad could be finalized, funding would need to be assured, which has been a perennial problem.

"We can start tomorrow and put it in place," said David Fink, president of Pan Am Railways. "You just need someone to agree with you, and that hasn't been the case." Pan Am, which is based in North Billerica, Mass., owns the railroad tracks leading from the New Hampshire border to Nashua, then north to Manchester and Concord and west to Wilton.

Regular daily passenger rail service from Boston to southern New Hampshire ended in 1967, according to the Nashua Regional Planning Commission. In 1980, there was a demonstration program that had passenger trains running from Concord to Boston via Manchester, Nashua and Lowell. But the train was discontinued a year later due to a lack of funding from the Reagan administration.

"They considered it a success, but there was no money to continue it," said Sharon Wason, director of the Central New Hampshire Regional Planning Commission and a member of the New Hampshire Rail Transit Authority. Since then, restoring rail service to Concord has been part of two regional transportation plans.

"The discussion, talk, study of extending passenger rail began when that project ended, and it's been going on ever since the '80s," said Christopher Morgan, administrator of the Bureau of Rail and Transit for the state Department of Transportation.

In 2006, Gov. John Lynch created a task force dedicated to bringing back passenger rail to southern New Hampshire. The task force included the governor's office, Pan Am Railways, the cities of Nashua and Manchester, the Manchester Airport, two southern New Hampshire planning commissions, and the Greater Nashua Chamber of Commerce.

In January 2007, the group came out with a proposal that would include one rail line from Manchester to Lowell, Mass., and another from Wilton to Nashua, operated by Pan Am. The cost was estimated at \$113.6 million, with an additional \$8.5 million needed to operate it in the first year and operating costs rising to more than \$10 million a year in 2016.

Morgan said that in all the discussions about reviving the railroad, a lack of funding has been the main barrier to moving ahead. In recent months, however, the possibility of an infusion of federal money from the U.S. government's economic stimulus program has revitalized the discussion of passenger rail.

Transportation Commissioner George Campbell has asked for \$300 million to renew the railroad between Manchester and Lowell, with train stations in Nashua, Merrimack, the Manchester airport and Manchester, and a connection between Lowell and Boston via the Massachusetts T.

The funding request was submitted to a category of federal funding dedicated to rail and transit and is separate from a \$230 million request Campbell made for highway and bridge projects.

Tale of two plans

In the renewed discussions, two separate proposals have evolved. The proposal now advocated by the New Hampshire Rail Transit Authority would cost about \$300 million to run rail lines from Manchester to Lowell.

Pan Am's proposal would cost closer to \$100 million for a rail line that extends north to Concord and also has a feeder service along Route 101A connecting Wilton to Nashua, according to Fink.

The tracks for these lines are already in place, but they only carry freight and not passengers. Typically, to upgrade a track for passengers, Morgan said, there would need to be heavier rail, new ties, either a double track or a passing track, and a signal system. Morgan said the difference between the costs of the two plans is largely in the level of upgrade.

Fink said he would like to refurbish old railroad cars, which would be bought from Amtrak or other transit authorities that have since replaced them. He does not plan on putting in a second track and would have fewer "embellishments" than the transit authority.

Stephen Williams, acting chairman of the New Hampshire Rail Transit Authority and executive director of the Nashua Regional Planning Commission, said the transit authority would offer more trips. Pan Am would offer four or five round trips a day, while the transit authority wants to offer 11 or 12 trips, starting earlier in the morning and running later at night.

According to Bill Boynton, spokesman for the Department of Transportation, the transit authority's plan would have double tracking, which would involve laying a second track instead of just fixing up the existing one. It would have rail stations, instead of the platforms that Fink suggested, and would use newer equipment.

"One is sort of bare bones. . . . The other is much more bigger enhancements," Boynton said.

The transit authority plan would allow passengers to stay on one train from Manchester to Boston, while Pan Am's plans would require switching trains. The transit authority's plan would integrate the trains into the existing operations of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, which operates the T. New Hampshire would then need to buy new train cars similar to the double-decker cars the MBTA is buying for the rest of its service. Of the economic stimulus money, \$64 million would go toward buying rail cars.

The biggest difference between the two plans would be in location. Pan Am's plan would start out reaching Concord, while the transit authority would first focus on the leg going only to Manchester.

Fink said in order for the train to become a "commuter operation," it needs to go to Concord. "You're filling a market need," he said.

Fink criticized the state's original plans, which would have gone only to Nashua.

"It has to go to Concord, plus it has to go to the largest city in the state," Fink said. "It doesn't make an ounce of sense to me to stop it at the border, or at Nashua."

Williams said he agrees that reaching Concord is a priority. But he estimates that the cost of a railroad reaching Concord could be twice as expensive as the cost to get to Manchester. "The issue's one of money," Williams said.

The transit authority wants to first build a train line to Manchester, then eventually extend it to Concord when money becomes available. Wason estimated that it would take an hour and 40 minutes to get from Manchester to Boston.

The state and Pan Am are negotiating over which plan will be implemented. "We've got one point of view, he's got another. . . . It's just a matter of we need to sit down and have negotiations to figure out what's going to work best for everyone and how all the costs will get paid," Williams said.

The time frame, he said, could depend on how much money the state actually gets from the federal government.

"If it's a lot of money, it will be probably a 24-hour-a-day task for us for the next six months," Williams said. "If there's not a lot of money, it will take a bit longer. Certainly, the opportunity with economic stimulus moved it onto the front burner for everyone." Once a plan is approved, upgrades could take one to two years, he said.

Some private organizations have taken the lead in advocating for a train system.

Mark Richardson is president of the nonprofit organization New Hampshire Businesses for Transportation Infrastructure and the spokesman for the New Hampshire Railroad Revitalization Organization. The two organizations, he said, are made up of businesses and individuals who believe a renewed railroad is important for the state's economy. Businesspeople, he said, are ready to develop homes and businesses in areas where the trains will bring new customers and residents.

Richardson said in the long term Concord must be part of the proposal.

"First, it's the state capital," he said. "Second, alongside Manchester and Nashua, it's a significant population center of the state. And third, it's the center of political power."

Although Nashua would attract the most commuters from Massachusetts, Richardson said Manchester would attract a mix of commuters and people going to the airport, and Concord would become more of an “inter-city” destination for people within New Hampshire.

“By having service to the state capital you’d be putting New Hampshire on the national map as far as rail service,” Richardson said. “Nashua and Manchester would be an extension of local service from Boston.”

But the biggest barrier to any type of rail service is likely to be cost. Richardson said he does not expect private businesses to donate money for infrastructure.

“We don’t ask private companies to build roads, sewer systems or public schools,” Richardson said.

Fink said Pan Am is involved in the project because it was asked by the state. It does not expect to gain anything financially and is concerned about liability issues. He said Pan Am will not fund the improvements.

“The \$100 million would come from the government,” Fink said. “You take buses running out of Concord . . . government buys equipment, supplies them with stations, parking lots. . . . The politicians have to make up their mind, do we want to do this or don’t we.”

Even if the state can build the infrastructure with \$300 million from the federal government, the question remains where money would come from to operate it. Wason said in Massachusetts, less than 30 percent of MBTA revenue comes from fares, with the rest coming from the state or federal government. So far, Morgan said, there is no state money available in New Hampshire to pay for a railroad.

“I just wonder where the operating subsidies are going to come from to keep it running,” Wason said. “I’d hate to see something get started and flounder.”

Williams said the transit authority is looking at funding models that were used in other states. Options include: funding the railroad from the state’s general fund, imposing a sales tax, establishing a special rail line tax district where property taxes pay off a bond, assessing a fee on railroad tickets, imposing a motor vehicle registration fee, and others.

And those involved in the project caution that if the federal economic stimulus bill does not pass, or if New Hampshire does not get the money it asked for, the entire project could be put on hold again.

“If we don’t have that money, there’s not an obvious alternative of funding right now,” Boynton said.