

PROJECTED IMPROVEMENTS  
TO  
THE VERMONT RAILWAY  
WESTERN CORRIDOR



JANUARY 2010

## **BACKGROUND**

In Act 50 of the 2009 Vermont legislature, the Agency of Transportation was directed as follows:

*Sec. 113. 2006 STATE RAIL & POLICY PLAN*

*Consistent with the 2006 State Rail & Policy Plan, the agency shall estimate the total cost of (1) upgrading the western corridor rail line for passenger rail service to and from Burlington, Rutland, Bennington and Albany, New York, (2) operating a passenger rail service from Burlington to Rutland connecting to White Hall, New York and (3) operating a passenger rail service from Burlington to Rutland to Bennington connecting to Albany, New York. The agency shall present its analysis to the House and Senate committees on Transportation by January 15, 2010*

The information contained herein is based on the most updated data available and includes estimates submitted to the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) as part of the ARRA “High Speed Intercity Passenger Rail” (HSIPR) grant applications. The Agency of Transportation (VTrans) submitted 3 grant applications under the HSIPR program between August 23, 2009 and October 2, 2009.

In discussions with the FRA prior to submittal of our applications, it became clear that the route south of Rutland through Hoosick Junction and Mechanicville, NY to Schenectady and Albany-Rensselaer needed to be further vetted. The FRA pointed out that in order for us to submit an application for funds to improve the section of rail in Vermont (Rutland-Hoosick Junction); we would need to have all the agreements with the operating railroads on the entire route in place. Unfortunately there was no current information on what improvements the out of state railroads would require in order to initiate passenger service. Consequently, we reached out to New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) to see if they would be willing to work with VTrans to determine those needs and also develop the required agreements for access to those lines for Intercity Passenger Rail Service. An MOU was established with New York that allowed us to submit a joint application for ARRA HSIPR funding to develop a new concept for passenger rail service to Southwestern Vermont and eastern New York State. This joint “planning” application was submitted to FRA on August 23, 2009 under “Track 3” of the HSIPR program, requesting \$500,000 in federal funds to be matched by the both states at \$250,000 each. NYSDOT and VTrans share a vision of multiple passenger rail frequencies over the route South of Rutland.

In our discussion with New York State it also became apparent that both States would be well served by retaining the Ethan Allen Express in its current route configuration (Albany-Schenectady-Saratoga Springs-Fort Edward-Castleton-Rutland), and extending that train north to Burlington. This concept, including the above-mentioned vision of multiple passenger rail frequencies over the route south of Rutland, was very appealing to both State DOTs as well as the FRA. Thus an improvement project to the Clarendon Pittsford Railroad (CLP) between Whitehall, NY and Rutland, Vermont was developed,

along with the improvements to the Vermont Railway (VTR) from Rutland to Burlington that would allow passenger rail service to be established to Burlington. This project is referred to in the ARRA HSIPR “Track 2” application as the “**Ethan Allen Express Improvements and Extension**” project. The grant application was submitted to FRA on October 2, 2009. The total project cost (Final Design plus Construction) is estimated at \$70,509,000, and consists of \$68,509,000 in federal dollars matched with a commitment of \$2,000,000 from the state and the railroad. The details of the construction estimates for the “Track 2” application are in attachments “A” and “B”.

The third HSIPR grant application was submitted under the “Track 1” program and included work on the New England Central Railroad. It does not include any work on the western corridor and therefore warrants no further discussion in this report.

## **ESTIMATED COSTS**

*(1) Estimated total cost of upgrading the western corridor rail line for passenger rail service to and from Burlington, Rutland, Bennington and Albany, New York*

A significant portion of the estimated cost to upgrade the western corridor rail line for passenger service was included in Vermont’s “Track 2” application for ARRA funding, and as such detailed estimates were developed. The Rail unit utilized a consultant to update data that was collected in a physical assessment of the VTR in late 2004. After extensive discussions between the Railroad and the Agency, it was agreed that upon completion of the proposed estimate of improvements Amtrak would be able to operate at FRA Class III (60MPH) speeds through that segment. Note that the estimates below do not include any projects that are currently funded in the 2010 capital program.

**Whitehall (NY) to Rutland (CLP) to Burlington (VTR):** This segment is broken into two areas for improvements: Whitehall - Rutland and Rutland – Burlington. Total estimate for the project is \$70,509,000.

Whitehall (NY) to Rutland (CLP) See Attachment “A”. Total estimate for track improvements is \$17,745,000.

Rutland to Burlington (VTR): See Attachment “B”. Total estimate for track improvements is \$49,519,000.

Bridge work and Grade Crossings: Total estimate for bridge work, including contingency and engineering, is \$2,145,000 for both segments. Total estimate for grade crossings is \$1,100,000 for both segments.

**Hoosick Junction to Rutland (VTR):** This segment is broken into two areas for improvements: Hoosick Junction – Manchester (Southern) and Manchester – Rutland (Central). Total estimate for track improvements is \$37,883,000.

Hoosick Junction – Manchester (Southern): There was a considerable amount of work completed (\$16M) on the southern section between 1999 and 2002. This included installation of 21 miles of continuously welded rail (CWR), new cross ties and ballast, and removal of and replacement of turnouts. In addition, some crossings have been upgraded through that area. There is still some work to be completed in that section, including completion of the rail replacement, bridge and signal improvements. These improvements will bring the line between Hoosick Junction and Manchester up to FRA class III standards to operate passenger rail at 60MPH. Attachment “C” depicts the current estimate of \$8,786,000 for this work.

Manchester – Rutland (Central): This segment has seen the least improvements to date. However, with the increase in regular freight traffic over the line initiated in 2008 to utilize the interchange with PanAm Railways at Hoosick Junction, the agency completed two significant cross tie replacement projects. This work was an attempt to increase the margin of operating safety for those operations. Although these projects did contribute to the improvements required to operate passenger rail service, the amount of work to be completed through this 31 mile segment remains significant. Attachment “D” shows the current estimate of \$29,097,000 for these improvements.

Hoosick Junction – Mechanicville - Schenectady: Since all of this portion of the route lies in the State of New York, and is now part of the newly established joint operation of PanAm Railways and Norfolk Southern Railroad’s known as the “Patriot Corridor” no estimate for this section is available. There have been no recent discussions with the operating entity “PanAm Southern” (PAS) to introduce passenger service to that segment and what improvements would be necessary to do so. However, this segment of the route to Albany is included in an application submitted to Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) under its HSIPR “Track 3” Corridor Planning Initiative program. The joint “Track 3” application with New York State will look at the two routes to Rutland (CP to Whitehall and PAS to Hoosick Jct) to determine the costs of improvements as well as developing operating scenarios for multiple frequencies for this service. Should FRA select this project for funding, the planning work could be completed as early as spring 2011.

*(2) Estimated total cost of operating a passenger rail service from Burlington to Rutland connecting to Whitehall, New York*

During the development of the “Track 2” application, Amtrak prepared an operating cost estimate for the extension of the Ethan Allen Express from Rutland to Burlington. Based on the estimate provided, the first year operating deficit (State Subsidy) for the extended service would be \$1,485,000 which is **\$237,000 less** than the current (2009) Operating Subsidy. This is due to an anticipated 50% increase in ridership from the current level of 46,881 to 70,422 (see Attachment “E”) that results in a substantial revenue increase, while at the same time seeing only modest increases of the cost of operation. The projected operating costs for the Burlington service from our HSIPR “Track 2” application are shown in Attachment “F”.

*(3) Estimated total cost of operating a passenger rail service from Burlington to Rutland to Bennington connecting to Albany, New York.*

Since the Rutland - Hoosick Junction segment will be part of the study area included in our HSIPR Track 3 Planning Application, no recently developed operating cost or revenue projections are available. That information will be determined in the “service development plan” that is required by FRA in order to apply for future Corridor funding.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment A Clarendon & Pittsford Mainline Track program

Attachment B VTR Rutland – Burlington Track Program

Attachment C VTR Hoosick Jct. – Manchester Track Program

Attachment D VTR Manchester – Rutland Track Program

Attachment E HSIPR Track 2 Application Operating Cost Projection

Attachment F HSIPR Track 2 Application Corridor Program Metrics