



July 24, 2008

An open letter to the people of New Hampshire:

I read news reports of your recent Forum on Passenger Rail with great interest. Efforts by the New Hampshire Rail Transit Authority and the Southern New Hampshire Planning Commission to bring passenger trains back to Central New Hampshire are most encouraging. Certainly the time for offering people "trains" as a travel choice has come. However, news articles referencing the last time that passenger trains served Southern New Hampshire was in 1967 are not accurate. Stating in early 1980, and continuing for about 13 months (until the federal government terminated the grant), daily passenger service (2 frequencies each day on weekdays, one on weekend days) operated from Concord, NH, Manchester and Nashua to Boston via Lowell. At the time, I was Chief Railroad Services Officer for the MBTA, and a contract was in place with the then New Hampshire Transportation Authority for operation of these trains.

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Trains left Concord in the morning on weekdays, at the ungodly hours of 5.15 and 5.40 am, arrived in Boston for normal business trips, returning at 5.00 and 5.40 pm to Concord. By April 1980, Merrimack, NH was added as a stop, due to local demand. The weekday trains averaged at least 125-150 passengers each way on the second train alone, about half of them boarding at Nashua, as it was the only civilized scheduled time for the service on weekdays. The reason for this limited schedule was simple: the MBTA did not have any more rolling stock, and New Hampshire did not have the funds to provide added rolling stock (locomotives and coaches). At the time, the MBTA was just receiving delivery of the then brand-new Pullman coaches, the first new passenger rolling stock in almost 30 years. To justify New Hampshire's federal grant (at the initiation of NH Gov. Hugh Gallen), an experimental light vehicle called an "LEV" (light-experimental-vehicle) was used initially for one of the 2 round-trips. The LEV was a combination of a rail vehicle and a bus. It had none of the comforts of a rail coach, and all the disadvantages of a bus (cramped seating, 56 passenger capacity, etc). After a grade-crossing incident in Manchester, only a few weeks after it started operation, the LEV went wherever such vehicles go to their resting place, and the scheduled train was replaced by an old B&M "Bluebird" GP-7 locomotive, hauling 4 tired old B&M/MBTA Budd RDC cars (these RDCs having been mostly disabled and unable to run under their own power in the winter storms of 1977-78).

On weekends, the one round-trip from Concord to Boston operated with the new Pullman cars (5 cars train plus locomotive), and the schedule left Concord at a more civilized hour, allowing visitors and families to take the train and spend a day in Boston. This train was often 'sold-out' as it left Nashua, and for the first time in decades, the B&M was calling for an 'extra' train to operate from Lowell to Boston, since the packed New Hampshire train would have to run 'express' from Lowell to Boston (there was no more room on it!), and passengers destined for points south of Lowell would need to change trains to the 'extra' (local) at Lowell.

By the end 1980, the New Hampshire service was still growing, and the Merrimack and Nashua weekday markets were as large as most MBTA commuter rail stations in Massachusetts (about 125 boarding at Nashua, 30-40 at Merrimack), in spite of the early (and limited) departure times to Boston.

The New Hampshire service was not more frequent because there was no additional funding provided locally. MBTA had suggested a 5 or 6 frequency train schedule so that passengers could use the trains both to get to, as well as from, New Hampshire, and MBTA was able to operate mid-day and off-peak service, since those were the times of day when MBTA rolling stock was available, as well as on weekends.

The New Hampshire service terminated abruptly at the end of January 1981, when the federal grant was cancelled by incoming President Ronald Reagan, and the State of New Hampshire declined to put any operating subsidy into supporting continuation of the service. MBTA, at the request of the then Mayor of Nashua (Sullivan) attempted to try to preserve at least one round trip at day to Nashua, since the market was already there. The cost at that time was \$5,000 per year. No funds could be procured, and the service died.

Most of the New Hampshire federal grant, some \$3.0 million, was provided to the B&M to upgrade the tracks from Lowell to Concord, and to reset all the grade crossing warning gates to 60 mph from Lowell to Manchester, and to 40 mph to Concord. That work had been done and the tracks were actually in very good condition, and B&M/MBTA operated the service reliably. Clearly, this very limited experimental service back in 1980 proved that the passenger rail market in New Hampshire was indeed there to be tapped. Untouched, but still there, is the enormous Southern New England market that can be tapped to come to New Hampshire by train (and many folks in Southern New England already come, but they bring their cars, and all the associated costs for New Hampshire residents in building roads for the cars of those Southern New England visitors, and then having to maintain them). Having a travel "choice" to go by rail is not only for residents of New Hampshire, although that would be its primary purpose, but such a travel option is very attractive for visitors and tourists to come to the Granite State without as many of their cars that crowd the state virtually every weekend, and certainly also during peak weekday work-trip times. The common quip out here in California is now "we want you to come, we want you to bring your wallet, but we'd just as soon if you took the train and left your car home".

So, my message here is that there WAS regularly scheduled passenger service to Nashua, Merrimack, Manchester and Concord as recently as 1981, and it was a well used service, even with its limited one directional schedule. The only reason the trains did not continue to exist was New Hampshire's inability/unwillingness to provide any financial support for it once the federal grant was terminated. If those modest state/local dollars had been provided, Central New Hampshire would likely have today a corridor service that would be at least as frequent service, and as much ridership, as the MBTA-Rhode Island service to Providence, and/or the Downeaster Service to Maine.

Since New England is my original home, and I am still a property owner and taxpayer in New Hampshire, I have a very strong interest in seeing New Hampshire become a real partner in a region-wide New England rail network, especially to its key cities which are the economic engine of the state, and tie those cities to Boston by rail, which is the economic engine of New England. Thanks to the State of Maine, the New Hampshire communities of Dover, Durham and Exeter have passenger rail service, and are demonstrating what even 'suburban type' communities can generate for ridership.... more than anyone's wildest expectations. Just think of what a 'corridor type' service could do for New Hampshire, with time-competitive, frequent, comfortable and driving-free train service. Bus services that connect from train stations to other places that people want to go to, but where maybe there are no tracks, have worked exceptionally well in California, and can also do the same in New England.

As for critics who decry annual subsidy requirements, think of the annual cost as an 'annual maintenance cost' to protect your sunk capital investment. After all, when you build a new road, you also have to fund annual maintenance costs, which go up as the road ages. We don't decry that cost as 'subsidy'. Think about it. It is really the same concept. Trains will provide us with a real travel choice.

Passenger Rail is a worthwhile investment for our nation, and certainly for New Hampshire.

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