

The New England Regional Rail Coalition
Working To Advance Passenger and Freight Rail For A Stronger New England

March 27, 2009

Mr. Ray LaHood
Secretary of Transportation
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Ms. Jo Strang
Acting Deputy Administrator
Federal Railroad Administration
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Secretary LaHood and Acting Deputy Administrator Strang:

We, the New England Regional Rail Coalition (NERRC), write to express our strong support for the investment of high-speed and intercity rail funding – soon to be available pursuant the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act (ARRA) – in New England. NERRC is a new and growing collaboration of business interests, planners, transportation and environmental advocates, and current and former legislators who recognize the need for significantly greater investment in passenger and freight rail in our region. We believe an enhanced and expanded rail network is essential to safeguarding New England’s economic competitiveness and reducing the significant economic, environmental and social costs associated with our current, predominantly highway-oriented system.

The \$8 billion to be made available for high-speed and intercity rail provides an unprecedented opportunity to begin to build a more balanced, cleaner transportation system. Investing a portion of those funds in New England will pay enormous dividends by leveraging ongoing and much-needed investments in the Northeast Corridor, which enjoys the highest ridership among Amtrak’s service, and which serves as the “spine” of New England’s intercity passenger rail system. More specifically, ARRA funding for Amtrak and enhancements to the Northeast Corridor could be strongly leveraged by investing in New England projects that greatly enhance and build off this regional “spine” in a way that better integrates (1) the New England states with one another, (2) the New England region with other regions of the country, and (3) the northeast region with Canada.

In particular, significant opportunities for intercity and high-speed rail in New England include the following projects:

- **Extension of Amtrak’s Downeaster service from Portland, Maine to Brunswick, Maine, and high-speed rail service between Portland and Boston.** The Downeaster, with service connecting Portland and Boston, and serving ten cities and towns in Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts, was the fastest growing Amtrak service in FY 2008 and is projected to generate billions of dollars in transit-oriented economic development. Building on this success, the Downeaster can be significantly improved by extending service northward to Brunswick (at an estimated cost of \$30 million), thereby reaching one of Maine’s largest communities and greatly enhancing access. In addition to this project, new and upgraded infrastructure on the line between Portland and Boston – which has superior engineering for high-speed purposes – will allow the Downeaster – at a relatively low cost for this project type – to operate at speeds up to 110 mph, in furtherance of the Federal Railroad Administration’s 2000 designation of the line as a high-speed rail corridor.
- **Establishment of the N.H. Capitol Corridor passenger rail service in southern New Hampshire on the Boston-to-Montreal high-speed-designated corridor.** This project would bring passenger rail service to cities in southern-central New Hampshire, connecting this growing region of the state with Boston and providing a much-needed alternative to crowded highways for the growing number of commuters between New Hampshire and Massachusetts. With a projected cost of \$300 million, the N.H. Capitol Corridor project would include stations in Nashua, Bedford (with a connection to Manchester-Boston Regional Airport), Manchester and Concord, providing needed mobility options and significant transit-oriented development opportunities. Because the N.H. Capitol Corridor service would be located on a portion of the **Boston-to-Montreal corridor** designated by the Federal Railroad Administration for high speed rail, this project also will serve as an important investment in advancing a valuable high-speed rail connection between New England and Canada.¹
- **Extension of Amtrak’s Ethan Allen service to Burlington, VT and points north.** This project would extend Amtrak’s existing Ethan Allen service – currently connecting Rutland, VT with New York City – to Vermont’s largest city, Burlington. It would re-establish a rail connection for Burlington’s downtown rail station – a connection that was lost in 1953. The project involves the upgrade of a 45-mile section of track at an anticipated cost of \$45 million, and will bolster existing freight rail operations. A related project would upgrade the New England Central Railroad Tracks used by the Vermonter and enable the continuation of the Ethan Allen beyond Burlington and the restoration of service from Vermont to Montreal.
- **Rehabilitation of track infrastructure in western Massachusetts for Amtrak’s Vermonter service.** This project would involve the rehabilitation of rail

¹ The Boston-to-Montreal rail corridor, *via* New Hampshire and Vermont, was designated by the Federal Railroad Administration as a high-speed rail corridor in 2000. A Phase I Feasibility and Planning Study, completed in 2002, determined that HSR on the corridor is expected to be compatible with other rail operations, that no institution or environmental issues preclude HSR, and that anticipated ridership warrants an evaluation of the benefits and costs of Boston-Montreal HSR.

infrastructure that parallels Interstate 91 through western Massachusetts' Pioneer Valley, greatly benefiting Amtrak's Vermonter service between White River Junction, VT and Springfield, MA. The Vermonter currently travels an extra 40 to 50 minutes to avoid inadequate track infrastructure. At an estimated cost of \$25 million, the project will make this detour unnecessary, allowing significant time- and fuel-savings, as well as the restoration of rail service for two of the Pioneer Valley's largest communities – Greenfield and Northampton. The Pioneer Valley Metropolitan Planning Organization strongly supports this project, which would complement a plan to connect Springfield, MA and New Haven, CT with new commuter service.

- **Enhancement of intercity rail service between Boston and New York City via Worcester, Springfield, Hartford and New Haven.** This project would enhance important intercity rail service and connections for Worcester and Springfield, MA, and Hartford and New Haven, CT. In addition to enhancing connections among these important Massachusetts and Connecticut cities, this service would better connect these cities with Boston (and points north) and New York City (and points south), improving important regional and interregional connections.
- **Establishment of commuter rail service between New Haven, CT and Springfield, MA.** This project would bring much needed commuter rail service connecting New Haven, Hartford and Springfield, and numerous towns and cities in between. It also could provide important connections with Bradley International Airport, multiple links with Amtrak intercity service, and direct links to the existing Metro North and Shore Line East Commuter Rail in New Haven. The project would involve railroad right-of-way owned by Amtrak, and would complement north-south improvements for the Amtrak Vermonter rehabilitation project discussed above.
- **Upgrades to portions of the Northeast Corridor in Connecticut to improve Acela service.** As you know, Amtrak's Acela Express service on the Northeast Corridor is the nation's first implementation of high-speed rail. The Acela Express provides a critically important high-speed connection between Boston, New York City and Washington, D.C., and points in between. Unfortunately, portions of the Northeast Corridor between New Haven and New Rochelle preclude the Acela from operating at its 150 mph capability. Funding necessary improvements to these portions of the Northeast Corridor could play an important role in increasing speeds – and reducing travel times – for this important and highly successful high-speed service.
- **Construction of the North-South Rail Link (NSRL) in Boston.** This linchpin project would provide an essential connection between Boston's North and South Stations, eliminating a significant gap on the Northeast Corridor. The NSRL would greatly enhance – and leverage investments in – nearly all of the projects discussed above by extending the Northeast Corridor north to Maine, and by enabling uninterrupted service through Boston, thereby connecting service from the south (i.e., from southern New England, New York, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.) with service to the north (i.e., the Downeaster, Boston-to-Montreal high speed rail, and

N.H. Capitol Corridor projects, discussed above). The NSRL would be a highly strategic investment for the Northeast Corridor and the northeast region as a whole. Draft environmental studies for the project already have been completed; next key steps for the project are updating and finalizing those studies, and conducting preliminary engineering and design.

We understand the U.S. Department of Transportation is developing its strategic plan to improve and deploy high-speed passenger rail systems, to be followed by the development of guidance for the high speed rail corridor program, capital assistance for intercity passenger rail service grants, and congestion grants. We look forward to the further development of this important ARRA program. We anticipate that many of the projects discussed above will seek funding from this program which, we hope, will make the most of these many opportunities to improve, expand and build off of the Northeast Corridor, and thereby establish a rail network in New England that is truly regional, national, and international.

Finally, while the ARRA provides a good and important start for building the rail system New England and the nation as a whole needs and deserves, we fully understand that continued, substantial investments in rail infrastructure – both passenger and freight – will be essential. Accordingly, we look forward to working with you on reauthorization of the federal transportation law, and on other legislative efforts to generate and direct more funding to passenger and freight rail, to ensure that ARRA funding is leveraged by further investments, and that we achieve the efficient, balanced transportation system our region, and the United States, so desperately need.

Respectfully,

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