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> Local News > Springfield > PVACR crusade for New Haven - Springfield commuter railway

PVACR crusade for New Haven - Springfield commuter railway

By Natasha Clark

Assistant Managing Editor

SPRINGFIELD The Pioneer Valley Advocates for Commuter Rail (PVACR) met last week to reassess their strategy to crusade for the proposed New Haven-Hartford-Springfield commuter rail line.

About half of the 10-person organization convened in Longmeadow armed with reports, brochures, contact lists and passion. The group has also collected over 101 signatures on an online petition and 30 on an e-mail distribution list. Though members said some officials have verbally confirmed their support for the rail, no actual steps have been taken to bring the project to fruition.

At the top of the meeting they discussed the likelihood of getting the line included in state's transportation bond bill. In November 2007 Gov. Deval Patrick filed a three-year, \$2.9 billion transportation bond bill to address neglected roads, bridges and mass transit. The legislation includes improvements to the Fairmount commuter rail, the Green-Line extension to Somerville and Medford, the design and engineering for a Red Line-Blue Line connector between Government Center and Charles/MGH Stations and the creation of new commuter parking spaces at transit nodes.

According to information released by the governor's office, "additionally, the governor included \$100 million for rail and mass transit planning projects targeted at supporting economic growth and promoting geographic equity, including planning efforts for the South Coast Rail extension to Fall River and New Bedford, the Urban Ring project and the Blue Line extension to Lynn. Also included is \$75 million for the state's share of the Fitchburg Commuter Rail improvement project to improve safety and reduce commute times. This investment will leverage \$75 million of federal funding for the project."

Rebecca M. Townsend, of the PVACR, questioned whether the New Haven-Hartford-Springfield (NHHS) line could be added to the bond if it were included as an amendment.

"It's quite a doable project to have rail here in Springfield," Townsend said.

Costs for the NHHS are approximately \$300 million, with Connecticut funding 90 percent and Massachusetts paying \$10 percent or \$30 million. A 2005 study done by

Project brings clean water overseas

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the Connecticut Department of Transportation said a contingency of 40 percent was added to reflect unforeseen costs.

Rodney Chabot, current member and past chair of the Connecticut Rail Commuter Council for 11 years, told Reminder Publications they are in favor of the NHHS.

"Springfield would have a lot to gain because there is tremendous amount of traffic," Chabot said. "The biggest problem is in the '70s the railroad took out the second track. It was double track from New Haven all the way up to Springfield, which means with only one track some trains would have to sit. [That] means you can't run a fast track. With double track you can go without bothering the other imposing trains. The biggest expense would be to put back the second track. I don't want to make it sound like it's a new track. It was there but they took it away."

That same 2005 implementation study conducted by Connecticut's Department of Transportation cited a necessity for a minimum of 18 miles of extended double track sections to be added.

"That's the biggest obstacle and the most expensive," Chabot said.

New PVACR committee member Janina Millet-Foy said she decided to come to the meeting because she sees a need for the rail. A December 2006 Pioneer Valley Planning Commission report titled "The Economic Impact of the Proposed New Haven-Hartford-Springfield Commuter Rail" said, "within easy walking distance of a proposed commuter rail station (1/2 mile) are more than 50,000 residents and 120,000 workers. If even five percent of the 50,000 people living within a half mile of a station are also among those who work within a half mile of a station, that would be more than 2,500 potential daily commuters ... Finally, nearly 5,000 households living within a half mile of a station have no vehicle available to their household, suggesting that the commuter rail would be an important new transportation option for some of the region's residents."

Moira Murphy, also of the PVACR, said it still comes back to getting more of the public involved.

"[Officials] want to see the number of people interested," Murphy said.

Erica Walch took the lead on reorganizing their organization's approach to the public, stating that information on NHHS should be simple, accurate and easy to understand.

Craig Carr said even the PVACR Web site (www.pvacr.org) should have a catchy and easy to remember URL. They all agreed that more letters and phone calls to state representatives and senators needed to be a priority.

Carr and Sarah Gorski spoke about utilizing local radio spots to get the word out.

"Radio is the best way to reach people at 7 a.m.," Gorski said.

Chabot, who has witnessed the success of Connecticut's Metro North New Haven Line had this advice to offer to the PVACR:

"The main thing is to get their local state senators and all those representatives to work on their state government to expedite this and to work with their counterparts in Connecticut, because it should be a team effort. There is no timeline," he added. "The timeline is determined by the money line."

For more information on the Pioneer Valley Advocates for Commuter Rail, visit www.pvacr.org.



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