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Passenger
Rail

2011

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION PLAN

7 Passenger Rail

Railroads have a long and proud history in Franklin County dating back to the 1840s. In 1920, there were five separate railroad companies offering freight and passenger service to several towns in Franklin County, and as many as seventy trains a day operated in all directions. Today, Amtrak, the national passenger rail corporation, operates two trains daily that pass through, but do not stop, in Franklin County on their travel between Washington, D.C. and St. Albans, Vermont. That is all about to change, however, as federal stimulus funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) was approved in 2010 for upgrades to the Connecticut River Line train tracks, as well as for station development in Holyoke, Northampton, and Greenfield.

Existing Conditions

Passenger Rail Service in Franklin County
Since the late 1960s, passenger train service has gradually decreased in most areas of the United States. Franklin County has been no exception, going through a number of evolutions that eventually resulted in no passenger train stops in the county at all. Currently, the only passenger service in the region is operated by Amtrak as the “Vermont,” and it has no stops in Franklin County. This route is heavily subsidized by the Vermont Agency of Transportation, and travels between Washington D.C. and St. Albans, VT via Philadelphia, New York, and Springfield. The nearest train stops to Franklin County are Amherst, MA to the south, and Brattleboro, VT to the north. This route used to connect to Montreal, Canada, first by train, and later by bus. However, in 2004, the connecting bus service to Montreal was discontinued. As a result, the Vermont service no longer provides a connection to Montreal. Franklin County passengers wishing to board a train bound for Montreal must first travel to Albany, New York or New York City for that connection.

Historically, passenger rail service in Western Massachusetts traveled north-south along what is known as the Connecticut River Line. This line

roughly parallels Interstate 91 and the Connecticut River from New Haven, CT to St. Albans, VT and beyond. Today, the Vermont still follows this line except for one distinct exception. During the 1980s, due to a series of unresolved disputes regarding track maintenance, Amtrak relocated service away from the Connecticut River Line, traveling inland from Springfield, MA to Palmer, MA, where it turns north and rejoins the Connecticut River Line in East Northfield, MA. This detour adds approximately 25 minutes to each one way trip. Currently, the Vermont stops in Springfield, MA, Amherst, MA, and Brattleboro, VT once per day in each direction. The times of the stops are once in the late morning (southbound) and once in the late afternoon (northbound).

Current Activities and Future Planning

New England High-Speed Rail and Intercity Rail Network Vision

The six states in New England have come together to create a Vision for a future regional rail system that will enhance New England in many ways, including: providing a foundation for economic competitiveness; promoting livable communities; and improving energy efficiency and environmental quality. This Vision is based around a high-speed rail network that will link every major city in New England with smaller cities and rural areas and internationally to Montreal. This high-speed rail network is composed of a few key corridors, several of which directly and indirectly affect Franklin County. The following Figure 7-1 illustrates the envisioned network of corridors linking all of New England. This Vision was developed by the six Departments of Transportation of the New England states, who have committed to work together to coordinate efforts. The Vision includes the following key corridors and projects:

- New Haven-Springfield Corridor Improvements
- Knowledge Corridor Improvements (Springfield, MA to White River Junction, VT)
- Vermont/NECR Passenger Rail Improvements (eventual extension to Montreal)

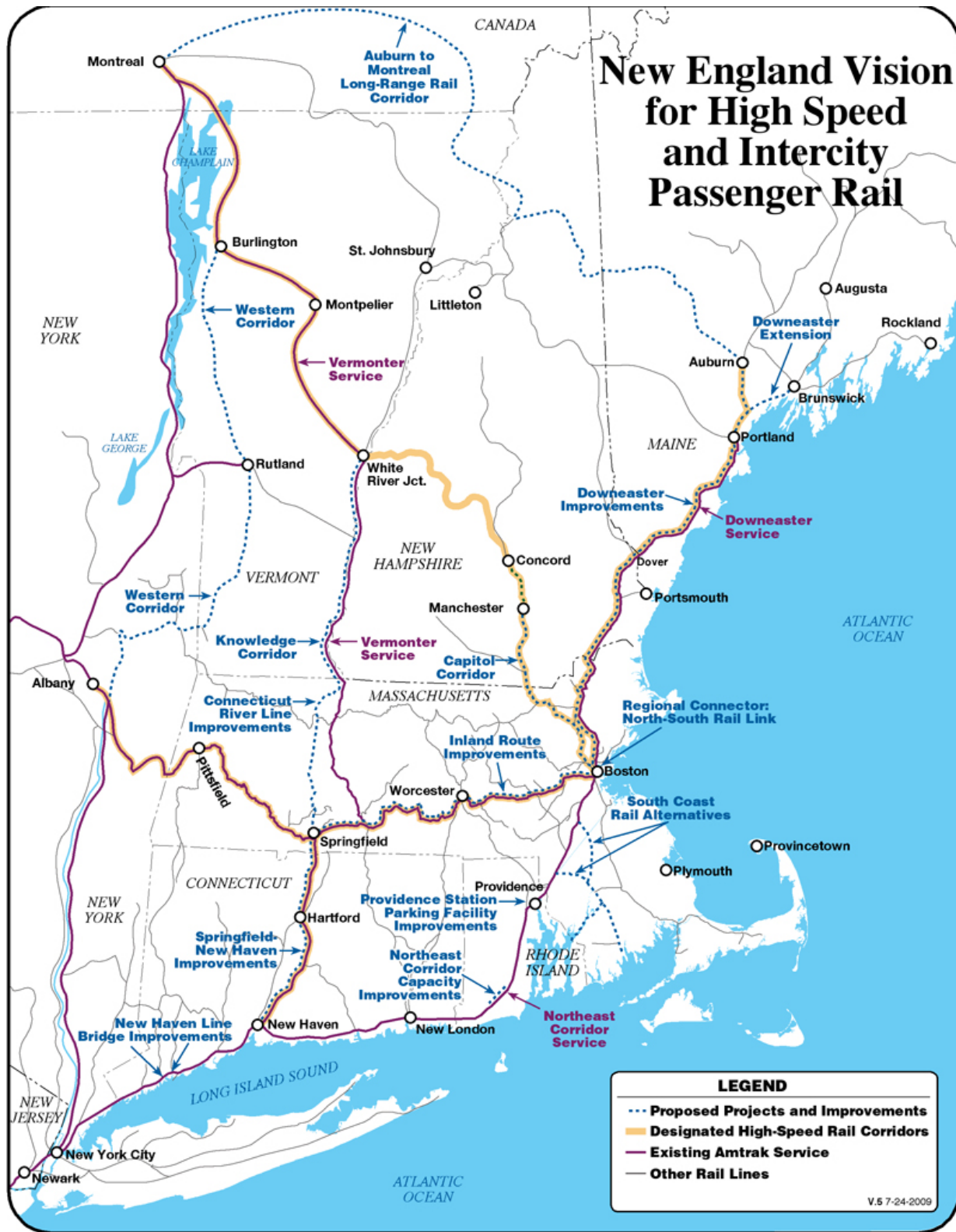


Figure 7-1: Map of New England Regional High Speed and Intercity Rail System

Source: New England Vision for High Speed and Intercity Passenger Rail, collectively developed by the State Departments for Transportation in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut.

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- Inland Route Service Improvements (Springfield to Boston)
- Downeaster Improvements (with eventual extension to Brunswick, ME)
- Western Corridor (Albany, NY to Burlington, VT)
- Capitol Corridor (Boston to Concord, NH with eventual extension to Montreal)

The following section discusses in detail several of these corridors and projects that directly and indirectly impact Franklin County.

New Haven-Springfield Commuter Rail Implementation

Part of the Vision for the New England High-Speed and Intercity Rail Network is the New Haven-Springfield commuter rail line. Formal planning for improvements to this corridor has been in progress for the last six years. Just recently, \$161 million in federal funding was awarded to begin implementation of the planning studies to make this corridor into a high-speed commuter rail line. The State of Connecticut has also committed \$266 million in state bonding for further implementation.

Project History

In June 2005, the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) completed an implementation study for commuter rail service between New Haven, Connecticut and Springfield, Massachusetts. In its Regional Transit Strategy (2001), the Capital Regional Council of Governments (CRCOG) which serves the Hartford metropolitan area, identified improvements to the New Haven to Springfield rail corridor as a key strategy for increasing and sustaining the region's economic vitality and enhancing regional livability. The *New Haven-Hartford-Springfield Commuter Rail Implementation Study* (2005) was prepared by Wilbur Smith Associates and overseen by a Steering Committee. The Steering Committee was comprised of representatives from regional planning agencies and communities along the corridor, from the Federal Transit Administration, the Federal Railroad Administration, Amtrak, and rail freight carriers including Pan Am Systems and CSX, the Peter Pan

Bus company, and state and federal environmental agencies.

The Commuter Rail Implementation Study evaluated the ridership, impacts, and costs of providing commuter rail service from New Haven to Hartford to Springfield, and explored various service options. The study included an analysis of current track and station conditions, a description and assessment of current service and future potential service alternatives, and strategies for integrating any new service with the existing system. The study also forecasted the potential future ridership, operating costs and revenues under different service alternatives, and preliminarily identified the potential environmental impacts associated with the commuter rail service. The report also identified potential funding sources for service expansion, recommended the next steps for implementing the study, and provided conceptual station plans and suggestions for new double track locations.

The New Haven to Springfield commuter route is composed of 62 miles of existing rail infrastructure that are currently owned and operated by Amtrak. This rail line, which is often referred to as the "Springfield Line," travels from Union Station in New Haven, CT through numerous towns and cities to Union Station in Springfield, MA. The new rail service is envisioned to provide future commuter rail access to the towns and cities along the rail corridor; multiple links to Amtrak's Intercity service; direct links to the existing Metro North Railroad and Shore Line East Commuter Rail services in New Haven; and a connection to the proposed New Britain-Hartford Busway.

Current Project Status

In August 2010, ConnDOT completed a *Service Development Plan for the CT New Haven-Hartford-Springfield (NHHS) Corridor*. Much of the Commuter Rail Implementation Study's recommendations were incorporated into this Plan. They include the following key elements:

- Increase one-way intercity trains from 12 to 24 per day;
- Add 21 one-way commuter trains per day;

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- Reinstall 24.5 miles of double track on existing single track locations;
- Increase the number of rail stations served by rail from 8 to 13;
- Have all stations incorporate high-level platforms and grade-separated pedestrian facilities;
- Improve the existing station in Windsor Locks to accommodate bus transfers from the station to Bradley Airport; and
- Revise local bus routes to provide bus service to the rail stations.

ConnDOT is currently completing an Environmental Assessment of the proposed rail improvements and should be completed by the Spring of 2011. The total cost of the project is estimated to be \$480 million. As mentioned, the State of Connecticut has agreed to provide \$260 million in funding and the federal government has provided an additional \$161 million in funding through federal stimulus funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) for the needed track upgrades. Together, these funding sources make up almost 80 percent of the needed funding for improvements to this rail line. It is expected that preliminary engineering and NEPA efforts will be completed in May 2011. Construction contracts will be awarded in 2013 through 2015. Operation of the new high-speed rail system should begin in 2016 with all construction completed by 2018.

Knowledge Corridor/Connecticut River Line Passenger Rail for Springfield, Massachusetts to White River Junction, Vermont

Another integral element of the New England Vision for an Intercity Rail Network is the "Knowledge Corridor" that runs from Springfield, MA to White River Junction, VT. The Knowledge Corridor, named for the high number of colleges and universities in the area, runs along the Connecticut River Rail Line. In January of 2010, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was awarded \$70 million to make improvements to the rail line to extend and restore passenger service. The funding will be used to relocate the existing Amtrak passenger train service, known as the Vermonter, back to its former route along the Connecticut River Line. The current route of the Vermonter was

detoured through Palmer many years ago. The restored alignment will cut 25 minutes per trip and add stops in Northampton, Holyoke, and, most importantly for Franklin County, Greenfield.

Project History

Federal transportation funds were awarded in Fiscal Year 2006 to examine the possible extension of passenger rail service north of Springfield, MA along the Connecticut River and Interstate 91. The Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVTA) was granted \$750,000 in congressional earmark funding to complete a feasibility study examining the potential for improved passenger rail service between Springfield, MA and White River Junction, VT along the I-91 corridor. This rail corridor currently has limited passenger rail service; Amtrak's Vermonter line makes one northbound trip and one southbound trip daily along the route, with two stops in Western Massachusetts, in Springfield and Amherst.



Amtrak Train in Northfield

The passenger rail feasibility study, which was coordinated by the PVTA and the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC), included the whole 186 mile corridor between the Massachusetts/Connecticut State Line and White River Junction. The route travels through the Connecticut River Valley, and connects Springfield, Chicopee, Holyoke, Northampton, Deerfield, Greenfield in Massachusetts and Brattleboro and White River Junction in Vermont. The feasibility study examined three aspects of rail service along the Knowledge Corridor:

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- The relocation of the Amtrak Vermonter back to the Connecticut River line route;
- The establishment of a commuter rail service beginning north of Springfield; and
- Increasing intercity passenger rail service along the entire north-south corridor, beginning in New Haven, CT to White River Junction, VT.

The feasibility study primarily focused on the relocation of the Vermonter with an added round trip per day to make two round trips per day along this line. The study found that in order for this to occur, improvements would have to be made to the line; including: crosstie and rail replacement, rehabilitation of grade crossings, reactivation of passing sidings, upgrading of switches and signals, and improvements to bridges. These improvements would also allow freight trains to be operated at a much faster 60 to 70 miles per hour, rather than the current 10 miles per hour.

The establishment of additional passenger rail service along the Connecticut River Valley Line would help promote transit oriented development patterns. Enhanced passenger rail service would also provide Franklin County residents with transportation options beyond the private automobile for intra-region and inter-region travel. Additionally, improvements to the track along this route would provide an opportunity to improve the freight service along the rail line. This could provide an opportunity to encourage some freight trucking shippers using I-91 to switch to rail transport, thereby reducing the future maintenance and repair costs along the interstate, and the environmental and other negative impacts of truck transport.

The FRCOG has served on the project team overseeing the Connecticut River/I-91 Rail Feasibility Study, and transportation officials from the PVPC, the PVTA, and the States of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont and New Hampshire have also been involved. The States of Vermont and New Hampshire have, for some time, recognized the importance of developing viable passenger rail service along the Connecticut River

Valley to the Hanover, NH/White River Junction, VT area.

Current Project Status

As mentioned, \$70 million in federal stimulus funding was awarded to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 2010 to begin rail improvements to restore passenger rail service to the Knowledge Corridor. This effort is being closely coordinated with the State of Vermont, who was also awarded \$52 million in federal stimulus funding to make track, roadbed, and bridge improvements to the current route of the Amtrak Vermonter. With the relocation of the Vermonter back to the Connecticut River Line, it is expected that the shortened trip length will increase ridership by 23 percent. Construction on the needed improvements to the line began in 2010 and should be completed by 2012, when service is anticipated to start with one round trip per day. It is hoped that this will be increased to three round trips per day by 2015.

Inland Route: Boston-Springfield-Hartford High-Speed Rail Corridor Feasibility Study

The Inland Route, which travels from Boston to Hartford via Springfield, is another component of the New England Vision for High-Speed and Intercity Passenger Rail. A \$1.72 million grant was awarded in 2010 from the Federal Rail Administration (FRA) to conduct a high-speed rail feasibility study for the Hartford-Springfield-Boston corridor. The PVPC is serving at the lead agency for this study and has contracted the work to HDR, Inc. The feasibility study should commence in the Spring of 2011 and be completed by the Fall of 2012.

The study is seen as a followup activity to the *Service Development Plan for the CT New Haven-Hartford-Springfield (NHHS) Corridor*, which will extend commuter rail service from Connecticut north to Springfield, MA. It also ties into the Knowledge Corridor/Connecticut River Line improvements. The Boston-Springfield-New Haven corridor historically was a key part of the Northeast Rail System, and provided one of the earliest rail routes between Boston and New York City, prior to

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for potential service improvements. Short-range (within five years), mid-range (five to ten years) and long-range (expected to take ten years or longer) recommendations were proposed. A number of the proposed improvements will have positive impacts for the residents of Franklin County who currently ride, or who would like to ride, this commuter rail service to the Boston metropolitan area.

The short-range recommendations of the Fitchburg Rail Service Expansion Study included a number of station improvement projects and other changes aimed at reducing travel times, and increasing passenger comfort, service reliability, and the overall quality of the service to better meet ridership demands.

The recommended mid-range improvements continued these goals. Among the recommendations is the implementation of a new van/bus shuttle service from Gardner to the Fitchburg Station. One idea is to locate a Park and Ride lot between Fitchburg and Gardner and run shuttle service for the station to and from there. This service has not commenced yet, but is being planned. The mid-range recommendations also included initiating reverse commute service which would provide additional transportation opportunities to the Fitchburg area and beyond.

The long-range recommendations of the study include extending commuter rail service along the Fitchburg Rail line beyond the current Fitchburg terminus to either Gardner and/or Wachusett. In 2009, \$55.5 million in federal stimulus ARRA funding was provided for the Wachusett Commuter Rail Extension Project. This project will extend the Fitchburg Commuter rail line by 4.5 miles to a new rail station on the western border of the Town of Fitchburg near Route 2. The project also includes track improvements in Westminster to support freight and passenger rail and a new layover facility for light maintenance. It is expected that the Wachusett Station will serve an estimated 400 new commuter rail passengers beginning in 2012. The location of the station so close to Route 2 will simplify access for commuters as they drive to the

train. Groundbreaking for the station occurred on November 8, 2010.

Commuter rail service from Gardner to Boston previously operated on the Fitchburg Line in the early 1980s. In the 1980s, the service began with 60 round-trips to Boston each weekday. The service was reduced in 1983, and then discontinued entirely in 1984 due to inadequate funding. The Fitchburg Commuter Rail Service Expansion Study lists a number of constraints to the expansion of the commuter rail line from Fitchburg 16 miles west to Gardner. The major factor cited is the ownership and availability of the rail line. The rail infrastructure from Boston to Fitchburg is owned by the MBTA. From Fitchburg west, Pan Am Southern owns the infrastructure, and the MTBA would need to negotiate an easement with Pan Am Southern to operate commuter rail service on this section. Another major factor is the need to upgrade the tracks. At the present time, half of the Fitchburg-Gardner section is single track, and would need to be at least double track to support commuter service and the continuing freight transport. The study estimates the capital costs of upgrading this portion of the line and commencing the commuter service at \$50 million.

The main conclusion of the Fitchburg Commuter Rail Service Expansion Study focused on the study's short-term recommendations and the need to reduce the travel times between Fitchburg and Boston. These recommendations were then followed-up upon in the Fitchburg Line Improvement Implementation Plan completed in December 2005. The Fitchburg Line Improvement Plan identified its primary goal as reducing the trip time between Fitchburg and Porter Square in Cambridge to one hour, from the current scheduled trip time of 80 minutes during the morning peak. The Improvement Plan listed many specific steps that could be implemented to help achieve that goal.

The implementation of the mid-range and long-range recommendations is slower, yet still in progress. The extension of the commuter rail line from Fitchburg west is highlighted as a long-term

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priority, despite its cost and challenges. The new Wachusett Station is a small step in this implementation. The expansion of commuter rail service from Fitchburg to Gardner, and even in the shorter term, the creation of a Park and Ride lot and shuttle service for the Fitchburg Intermodal Center, hold promise for Franklin County commuters seeking transportation options for traveling to the Boston metro area.

The FRCOG, as the staff of the Franklin County Transportation Planning Organization, continues to include a task in its annual Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) to provide support and to advocate for increased passenger rail service in Franklin County, and to participate in, and monitor the various studies and implementation projects that are planned or underway, as discussed in this chapter. In this task, the FRCOG works with other Metropolitan Planning Organizations and state agencies in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont, and New Hampshire to initiate and support efforts to increase passenger rail service in Franklin County and New England.

Franklin Regional Transit Center

Construction has begun on the Franklin Regional Transit Center. The Transit Center is located in downtown Greenfield and will act as a hub for regional transit services that will provide connections to many transportation modes such as local public transit, intercity bus carriers, demand response services, local taxis, and bicycling and walking. The Transit Center's location is also directly adjacent to rail tracks on the Connecticut River Line and will offer access to future passenger rail services on the Knowledge Corridor when it returns to the region in 2012.

Work to develop a Franklin Regional Transit Center began in 2000. In 2002, an advisory group for the creation of the Regional Transit Center was established, and an initial feasibility study for the center was completed. The feasibility study, which was funded by the Executive Office of Transportation and Construction (now the MassDOT Office of Transportation Planning), identified potential sites for the transit center. In

2004, another study was conducted and a consultant was hired to reevaluate potential sites using revised criteria. These criteria included improving access and visibility of transit in the urban renewal area, and selecting a site that could serve all modes of public transportation, including potential future rail. Under these criteria, a top location was identified and selected: the Toyota of Greenfield site on Olive Street and Bank Row in downtown Greenfield. This site is located in the Greenfield Bank Row Urban Renewal Zone and was acquired for the Transit Center in January 2009. It is expected that the construction of the Transit Center will serve as a catalyst for additional development in this area of downtown Greenfield. The site is 1.8 acres in size.

The FRTA will own and operate the center. The transit center is planned to have bike racks, indoor waiting space, ticket counters, restrooms, and other amenities and services. The center is being designed as a model "green building" with net-zero energy use and will have on-site energy generation in the form of solar panels. It will be the first net-zero transit center in the country. The building will be 24,000 square feet and will house the offices of the FRTA and the FRCOG. A passenger rail platform is also being designed for the site to accommodate passengers from the new service that is anticipated to begin in 2012.

In November 2005, the FRCOG and the FRTA were notified that a \$1.8 million Congressional funding earmark to begin development of the regional transit center had been secured. The Massachusetts legislature provided \$2 million in a bond bill in 2008 for construction of the Transit Center. In 2009, ARRA federal stimulus funding in the amount of \$12.8 million was awarded. Groundbreaking occurred in April 2009 and construction began in earnest in October 2010. The anticipated completion date is January 2012.

Recommendations for Passenger Rail

- Continue working with the Franklin Regional Transit Authority on the site design and development of the **rail platform at the Franklin Regional Transit Center** in Greenfield.

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- Continue to participate and monitor in the implementation of the **Knowledge Corridor improvements** and continue to support the expansion of commuter rail service along this line.
- Continue to participate in the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission-led study exploring the potential for **rail service along the Hartford-Springfield-Boston corridor**, and support improvements which will benefit Franklin County residents and businesses as feasible.
- Continue to monitor progress on the implementation of **New Haven-Springfield Corridor improvements**, and its implications for Franklin County, and the potential for passenger rail commuter service north of Springfield, Massachusetts.
- Continue to monitor the implementation of the recommendations of the **Fitchburg Commuter Rail Service Expansion Study**, particularly the recommendations which could most affect Franklin County commuters who currently, or who would like to, use commuter rail to commute to jobs in the Boston metro area.
- Work with the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission to evaluate the feasibility and costs of extending **passenger service west from Fitchburg to Franklin County**.
- Continue to work with the other New England States to support and assist in creating the New England high speed and intercity rail vision.