

NEW ENGLAND TRANSPORTATION: TIME TO RE-LINK

By Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson

After steady decline across the 20th century, could passenger rail service in New England be ready for revival – a timely response to gridlocked highways and spiraling oil and gas prices?

A few hopeful straws are flying in the wind.

The Connecticut Legislature has just approved a \$2.3 billion transportation package including funds to start up, by 2010 or 2011, commuter rail service all the way from New Haven, through Hartford, to the Massachusetts state line, with a bus link to the Bradley airport.

Originally, the service would have stopped at Hartford, but representatives of Massachusetts' Pioneer Valley Planning Commission convinced the Connecticut Transportation Department to look further north with the goal of connection to Springfield – and potentially beyond that, in future years, to Northampton, Greenfield and Brattleboro, Vt.

Ideally, said Tim Brennan, leader of the Pioneer Valley Group, the new rail service would serve Bradley directly, delivering passengers into the airport that ought to be – but in

reality hasn't proven to be – a sparkplug for economic advance up and down the Connecticut River Valley. But the costs were so great that the idea of a bus shuttle emerged.

Still unresolved: rail appropriations of \$30 million by the Massachusetts legislature. Local legislators are hopeful, even though Beacon Hill often seems to neglect western Massachusetts.

The new Connecticut-Massachusetts cooperation, say backers, can be traced back to the 2000 founding of the Knowledge Corridor, an economic development strategy for the bistate Hartford-Springfield-Northampton region.

In the meantime, rail ridership on the 4 1/2-year old Downeaster, with Boston-Portland service, rose to more than 293,000 passengers last year, up from 248,000 in 2004. Trains and Concord Trailways buses (also scoring strong ridership gains) share an attractive, small-airport-like terminal in Portland. The 750-car parking lot is filled to capacity most days.



Could a “New England NATO”—a six-state alliance of governors, transportation directors, business, foundation and environmental leaders—create a compelling vision for New England’s fractured transportation system?

Public transportation advocates admit all this is just a start at restoring the robust six-state network New England railroads had a century ago. Mainers would like to see the Downeaster service speeded up and extended to Brunswick and Rockland (with possible ferry service to Bar Harbor). Vermonters are anxious to get passenger rail service reconnected to Montreal. Nashua wants rail connection to Lowell, a first step toward full Boston-to-Montreal service that would include Concord,

Montpelier and Burlington.

And serious investment in eastern Massachusetts commuter rail service, say backers, would serve New Bedford, Fall River and other South Shore towns that not only need economic stimulus but can offer far more affordable housing than Boston or its close-in suburbs.

But can piecemeal efforts create the integrated air-highway-rail-water transportation system New

England really needs to be competitive in this century? On some transportation issues – especially protecting the six states’ position when Congress debates funding formulas in major federal transportation bills – leadership by business leaders of the 80-year old New England Council has helped the region’s Washington representatives work in tandem, and effectively.

But where’s some timely, “out-of-the-box” thinking on such ideas as a regional rail network connecting all of New England’s leading airports? And as 14 nations around the world invest robustly in high-speed (up to 210-mile-per-hour) rail, why aren’t New England political leaders pushing for radical upgrading of Northeast Corridor service into New York (New England’s link to the literal economic capital of the world)?

New England, notes Connecticut resident and New York Regional Plan president Robert Yaro, “is presently experiencing all the disadvantages of the most congested expensive population corridor in the western hemisphere with few of the advantages that should flow

with easy access to New York as well as Boston.”

One possibility: a formalized New England-wide infrastructure authority, to start making priority investments. James RePass, leader of the Providence-based National Corridors Initiative, favors that step. He’d include the long-missing rail tunnel between Boston’s North and South Stations.

Brennan says a better first step might be a “New England NATO” – a six-state alliance of governors, transportation directors, business, foundation and environmental leaders to look at the top strategic issues and create a compelling vision. What transportation steps are priority items if New England’s to be a 21st century competitor? How can highways, rail, air, ports, passenger and freight service, be interlinked? How can transportation moves dovetail with terror- or storm-driven disaster planning?

Don’t think the challenge is small. An example: railroad freight now carries less than 1 percent of goods shipments in New England – so it comes by trucks instead. Those big rigs will claim 60-100% more of the region’s crowded road space by 2020.

So some big thinking and acting is imperative. The six governors must step forward, acknowledge their states’ transportation futures are intertwined, and create a shared, professional organization to unravel the transportation puzzles.

A few restored rail links are great – but no substitute for a clear New England-wide strategy.

Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson of the Citistates Group writer team have delved into New England’s challenges and hopes as part of a New England Futures project, with findings at www.newenglandfutures.org.