

Southeastern Massachusetts Commuter Rail Task Force

DRAFT

Minutes of June 8, 2005 at the SEED Offices, 4:00 PM.

Members Present:

William Clark, MAPC
Robert Luongo, New Bedford EDC
Robert Overholtzer, OCPC
Jennifer Menard, South Coast Dev. Part.
David A. Tibbetts, South Coast On Track
Richard Shafer, Taunton IDC
John Bullard, Vision 2020

Henry Young, Acushnet
Martha White, Easton
David Kennedy, New Bedford
Lou Gitto, Stoughton

Others Present:

Joe Cosgrove, MBTA
Colleen Murray-Hackett, rep. Sen. Joan Menard
David Farmer, HDR
Ulla Hester, MBTA Advisory Bd.
Ed Coviello, OCPC
Pat Ciaramella, OCPC
Stephen Smith, SRPEDD

Luke Leonard, Jr., Lakeville
Kyla Bennett, PEER
George Bailey, MBTA Advisory Bd.
Katalin Parkas, OCPC
Charles Kilmer, OCPC
Louise Daley, SRPEDD
Greg Guimond, SRPEDD

1. Call to Order

Steve Smith called the meeting to order at 4:10 PM. Chair John Bullard and Joe Cosgrove from the MBTA called to say they were on their way from Boston and would be late.

2. Acceptance of Minutes, April 6, 2005

It was VOTED UNANIMOUSLY to accept the minutes of April 6, 2005.

3. Review of Work Program - Task 2: Old Colony Line – Changes in Land Use and Demand (OCPC)

Ed Coviello gave a presentation and update on Task 2 of the work program. He outlined the land use changes that have occurred in the areas around the train stations since rail was restored in 1997 for four communities. In Abington, there has been very little change in land use since rail began again. Brockton currently has a number of market rate condos and apartments being developed within ¼ mile of the station. There is commercial development planned as well. The proximity to commuter rail has been a catalyst for redevelopment and is a selling point for the housing units. There has been public and private investment in the area. Halifax has had no land use impacts around its

station. Kingston has been unsuccessful in its efforts to rezone a gravel site near its station to allow a transit village.

OCPC is currently assessing impacts on traffic, home values and other factors. They are interviewing planners, realtors and developers, and evaluating mishap data and non-peak ridership.

Ed also gave some preliminary results from the April 26 survey at the Lakeville, Kingston and Downtown Brockton stations. Kyla Bennett suggested that responses be correlated to show the host community responses only.

4. Commuter Rail Station – Dean St. (Route 44) Taunton

Dick Shafer gave some background on the nine acre Dean St. site. It is a long-abandoned industrial site with unknown contamination. It is bisected by a stream and contains what appears to be a manmade lagoon. The City gained ownership and recently put out a RFP with little response. There is an environmental assessment being done now. Some redevelopment has occurred around the site, including over 30 new condo units on Longmeadow Road. A car repair facility across the street has bought a parcel that provides access to the rail.

Greg Guimond showed photos and maps of the area. He noted that people are buying up station locations here and elsewhere and putting in uses. He noted that the high water table in the ballfield adjacent to the Dean Street site may be due to many blocked culverts underneath the rail ROW. He showed the current MBTA plan for this site that includes 642 parking spaces. The Stone Station granite company would have to be relocated. Dick Shafer noted that the City was not going to prevent new businesses and jobs from locating in a possible future rail station, when it was not known when or if the rail would ever come.

Greg identified an 84-acre Study Area around the proposed station that could be considered for Brownfield, Urban Renewal, TOD, EOEAA Smart Growth, EDA Public Works Funds, TIF or DIF. Highway funds could be used to build a pedestrian bridge over the tracks. Federal Transit funds could provide bridge/road separation. The ballfield is located in the center as green space. He suggested the development of two different parking lots in two different places along an 800-foot platform. The ballfield could share parking with the MBTA.

City Hall is ½ mile away; the Taunton River is 800 feet away. The existing residential density between the site and downtown is 6-8 units per acre. GATRA, the transit authority, is willing to modify their bus service to serve the site. That would make the site eligible for the State's TOD program.

Joe Cosgrove noted the MBTA's financing plan. He asked what are the development partnership opportunities along the site. How can value from the state's investment be recaptured and put into the project?

Dick Shafer noted that the factory site is an Economic Opportunity Area. He also noted the Historic District and protected homes along Dean Street, which is adjacent to the site.

Steve Smith explained that this item is on the agenda as a prototype of what this Task Force could do. New Bedford presented their specific local plans for the area around their proposed rail station. Other areas are much less prepared. Because Taunton had wanted to sell this site, it is important to discuss it now. Dick Shafer said that the MBTA was contacted to purchase the site, but they are not in a position to do so right now. The City is concerned with the liability of an abandoned site. Steve asked the Task Force for suggestions.

Mr. Shafer introduced Kevin Shea, the new Executive Director of Taunton Economic and Community Development. Mr. Shea stated that the first concern is to get a handle on brownfields. The City is putting the Dean Street site on an assessment list. Lou Gitto asked if a full environmental cleanup was needed to remove liability. Mr. Shafer said they thought the MBTA was moving quicker at one time; the idea was to cap and pave the site. Another concern of the City is that there is far too much State property in bad shape.

Mr. Smith asked if the Task Force could assist the City somehow in exchange for taking the property off the market. Dick said it was off the market now for environmental review. Kyla Bennett said that the role of the Task Force is to assess impacts; it is not an advocacy role. Martha White said the role of the Task Force is to help anticipate—not facilitate commuter rail.

Joe Cosgrove pointed out that new transportation infrastructure is not going to come if towns are sitting back and waiting for the State; it does not have the money to fund every needed project. The State must get creative with the towns, for instance, through increased property tax values as a result of building rail. Lou Gitto asked for clarification: if a community puts in a TOD use, they are to give some of the tax benefit back to the State or the MBTA? Mr. Cosgrove repeated that the State needs new ways to finance infrastructure improvements. He suggested that taking the position of waiting for the State to make it happen is unrealistic. Communities have to tie their land use to transportation investments. Mr. Gitto said that this group is here to plan development that makes sense for a future rail service, based on the Secretary of EOEAs Certificate. That is different from a position of, “now that you’ve developed, you’re going to have to pony up some money”.

Greg noted that Astrid Glynn said that communities have to be proactive. This group is doing that station by station, under Task 4B in the work scope. Mr. Gitto agreed, but is worried about financing coming from the communities. Will twenty communities be asked to come up with \$1B? Robert Luongo said that the State has not yet decided on the financing issue. They are looking at DIF money now for a new Route 24 interchange in Freetown.

John Bullard stated that his understanding of the Task Force is to be supportive of the cities and towns and their visions. New Bedford has a clear idea of how to take advantage of the rail and there is little role for the Task Force. Speaking for Taunton—is the City trying to get rail to this site and is it looking for ideas of how to develop around the site, in a way that takes advantage of the rail and maximizes the energy of the infrastructure investment? Dick Shafer said that the City is an advocate for rail. They are maintaining an area for a 1000-car lot at the County Street site. The Dean Street site, however, has an environmental issue that needs to be corrected without a lot of City money. John Bullard asked if this Task Force can be helpful to the City to get what they want to happen here? Mr. Shafer answered that Greg Guimond’s presentation was helpful to see what can be done in this area and he thinks the City is interested in any assistance the Task Force can give. He added that he has spoken with GATRA, which could adjust its route system to serve Dean Street and make the area a TOD. John Bullard commented that case studies, town by town, are helpful; the specifics of each plan will help the Task Force to focus on the issues.

5. State Transportation Plan – Response of the Task Force

Steve Smith announced that the Executive Office of Transportation is holding a Public Meeting on June 22 at 1:00 PM at UMass Dartmouth to present the draft State Transportation Plan. An earlier planned meeting had been cancelled. Steve noted that at the last Task Force meeting, Astrid Glynn of EOT spoke about the Plan and listed factors that determine project timing. These factors include: federal support, local support and leadership, comprehensive corridor plans and local contribution. Steve asked for the Task Force’s response to Astrid’s presentation. Specifically, is it the Task Force’s role to actively get involved in accelerating the rail project timing? He noted that discussion had already taken place about the third and fourth factors listed by Astrid (corridor plan and innovative local financing). A corridor plan, at a minimum, will look at what happens in communities that will receive stations, their response to the stations and impacts on the surrounding communities. Steve suggested that local contribution could refer to local improvements around stations to facilitate state investment, although the State may be looking for more than that.

John Bullard suggested that the Task Force focus on what it’s good at—how to get a corridor plan done that links the individual city and town plans. Let the State figure out how to do the financing and prioritize its investments. Any progress toward helping communities put together a plan, identify adverse impacts and how to mitigate them is useful—whether or not the rail is built and no matter when it happens.

Regarding the factor of “innovative means for local contribution”, Dave Tibbets noted that the use of DIFs or TIFs is fine if the revenue is used for local improvements. However, the Romney Administration and Doug Foy seem to imply that these tax revenues are for State infrastructure. He said that a \$22M train station was built in Lowell without any local funding at all. It spurred millions of dollars in private investment. Public transit investment spurs private investment.

John Bullard stated that the issue of local contribution will change with each Administration and is a waste of time. The Task Force work is most useful in planning for good design and project impacts. As there is focus on specific plans, both support and opposition will become more focused. It is better to keep all interests at the table, and that will not happen if the Task Force becomes an advocate. Mr. Shafer noted that even identifying what is happening along the corridor now, with or without rail, is useful. It was VOTED UNANIMOUSLY to have Steve draft a letter from the Task Force, in response to Astrid's presentation of the draft State Transportation Plan, which communicates to EOT how the Task Force will address the challenge put to them in the factors that influence project timing. That response will state that the Task Force intends to develop specific plans around the proposed transit investment for each community, starting with the host sites, but also including the surrounding communities. These specific plans will evolve into a corridor plan.

Martha White expressed concern about the adequacy of the Task Force budget to do a TOD plan around each station, as well as a corridor plan. Steve answered that the corridor analysis is a collection of specific plans to some extent. The original work scope includes four communities who are interested in TOD plans; some sites will require less detail, depending on community interest. Martha said Easton wants a TOD analysis. John said that the letter would be sent to everyone for approval before being sent to the State. If necessary, it will be approved at the next meeting.

6. Future Meetings

It was VOTED UNANIMOUSLY to schedule Easton as the host community to be discussed at the next meeting. The next meeting will be on September 14, 2005 at 4:00 PM.

7. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 6:05 PM.