

Southeastern Massachusetts Commuter Rail Task Force

Minutes of February 23, 2007 at the ATMC, Fall River at 12:00 PM

Members Present:

Robert Carney, Dartmouth	Donna Kulpa, Dighton
Ray Nascimento, New Bedford Chamber	Bill Roth, Fairhaven
Robert Overholtzer, OCPC	Peter Kortright, Fall River
Jennifer Menard, South Coast Devt. Partnership	Linda Grubb, Lakeville
Diana Shearstone, TACC	Kevin Shea, Taunton
Richard Shafer, Taunton Ind. Devt. Comm	Steven Ouellette, Westport
Carolyn LaMarre, TRWA	Francis Gay, GATRA
Robb Johnson, The Nature Conservancy	Lou Pettine, SRTA
Dr. Susan Peterson, SRPEDD	

Others Present:

Lt. Governor Tim Murray	Secretary Bernard Cohen
Richard Thompson, for Sen. Mark Montigny	Rep. Robert Correia
Adam Capdelaine, for Sen. Joan Menard	Rep. Tony Cabral
Rep. John Quinn	Rep. David Sullivan
Peter Antonellis, for Rep. Michael Rodrigues	Rep. Stephen Canessa
Mayor Robert Nunes, Taunton	Mayor Ed Lambert, Fall River
Mayor Scott Lang, New Bedford	Joe Cosgrove, MBTA
Kyla Bennett, PEER	Dennis Lyons, DATTCO, Inc.
Mike Sharff, Peter Pan Bus Lines	Rachel Bain, EOT/Planning
Ken Miller, EOT	Wendy Stern, EOT
Conrad Crawford, EOT	Erik Abell, EOT
Judi Riley, EOT	Edgar Adams, Roger Williams Univ.
Pat Ciaramella, OCPC	Charles Kilmer, OCPC
Karen Winger, OCPC	Bill Clark, OCPC
Stephen Smith, SRPEDD	Roland Hebert, SRPEDD
Nancy Durfee, SRPEDD	Sandy Conaty, SRPEDD
Louise Daley, SRPEDD	Joe LaPlante, Standard Times
Will Richmond, Herald News	

1. Call to Order

John Bullard was unable to attend due to commitments from his employer. Mr. Smith opened the meeting at 12:45 PM.

2. Introductions

Stephen Smith welcomed Lt. Governor Tim Murray and Transportation Secretary Bernard Cohen.

3. Remarks

Lt. Governor Murray commented that the next range of projects needs to take place in outlying areas of the state, such as Worcester, Fall River and New Bedford. Governor Patrick is preparing a Plan to bring rail to Southeastern Massachusetts with timelines that hopefully, will be done before April 4. Lt. Governor Murray noted that the Executive Branch cannot do it alone. Legislators have been bringing constructive ideas forward from Day 1 to make it happen.

Transportation Secretary Bernard Cohen said that today's tour is an invaluable experience. People need opportunities they do not have today to access jobs and education. That the train goes both ways is the most important statement he heard today. The project has broad, regional benefits, but it also has complicated issues—some of which were heard today. Such issues are not unusual; ways to mitigate the issues must be worked out. He said he is here today, mostly to listen but noted that he is seriously committed to move this project forward.

4. Presentation on the Project and Task Force work

SRPEDD Executive Director Stephen Smith gave a presentation with an overview of the New Bedford/Fall River commuter rail extension project. He noted that John Bullard starts every meeting by saying the Task Force is not an advocacy group. Its purpose is to plan and prepare for the train, in order to maximize the benefits of the project, whenever it comes. In his presentation, Mr. Smith noted that the Task Force mandate is to review overall regional growth impacts and make specific community recommendations. The projected growth in the region—with or without the rail—calls for action from the Towns to do planning and an analysis of land use in each community. SRPEDD is identifying priority protection areas and priority development areas in each of the study area communities. Hopefully, a Phase 2 for the Task Force would allow the work to proceed with technical assistance.

SRPEDD has also done a detailed analysis of the eight station sites. Some sites are no longer available, so some analysis of alternative sites has been done as well. Sites were evaluated for their TOD potential and development constraints. An analysis of layover sites was also done. The Lt. Governor and Secretary have just visited four sites. Mr. Smith added that the Task Force has a lot of work to do, particularly since it has been so long since the original planning was done.

5. Dialogue with Lt. Governor Tim Murray and Transportation Secretary Bernard Cohen about planning and growth issues related to the commuter rail project

Mr. Smith asked the Task Force members to stand and to express their concerns. He noted that everyone present will have a chance to be heard. Dr. Susan Peterson applauded the work of SRPEDD and said it was important to have the Task Force continue. Much of the data needs to be updated. Although not all members share opinions, they share a concern for the region. She said she would like to see support for the Task Force continue.

Peter Kortright argued that the Task Force needs to consider its mission and suggested that it is time the Task Force or another group support the delegation and transportation officials to proactively work on this issue and push the project forward.

Robert Carney said he was here to support the Mayors of Fall River and New Bedford. The project would not have as much effect on Dartmouth, but it is needed for the cities.

Robert Overholzer, representing Old Colony Planning Council, noted that two towns in his planning district are opposed to the project. He agreed it is valuable to keep the process going.

Kyla Bennett agreed that it is important for the Task Force to continue its work, to continue to help communities with the environmental and growth impacts. In response to Mr. Kortright, however, she noted the legal mandate of the group is to help communities plan and not to advocate.

Rep. David Sullivan said that the rail going both ways is an important perspective. He said rail will facilitate economic growth if smart growth principles are followed. He added that one of the biggest challenges of the cities is public safety. Absentee landlords exacerbate the problem. Rail is an opportunity for people to invest in the community. Increasing owner-occupied housing will defuse the public safety problem.

Donna Kulpa noted that there is not much transportation available for people with disabilities to get around. She added that much of the population is getting older and will develop disabilities as they age. Rail would be fairer than what we have now.

Rep. John Quinn noted that every other part of southeastern Massachusetts has rail. One of the presentation slides shows that Fall River and New Bedford are the only major population centers in eastern Massachusetts without rail. He expressed appreciation for the presence of the Lt. Governor and the Secretary.

Rep. Bob Correia said the project started out as a matter of equity. People who already have access to the train opposed it. SRPEDD says that severe congestion will exist on Route 24 by 2030, but it already exists. Thirty years ago, it took one hour to drive to Boston. Now it takes two hours, and there is no alternative. You can't widen Route 24; it creates a larger funnel with nowhere to go in Boston. Although people may not like the idea, it is necessary or there will be gridlock on Route 24. What is the alternative? More buses? Putting them on a crowded highway creates more fumes. Ambulances struggle now. There is no other logical route except rail, unless some new transportation mode comes along. The project would have cost \$450 million 25 years ago. It isn't going to get cheaper in human or monetary costs. Like it or not, the reality is that it must be done.

Carolyn LaMarre of the Taunton River Watershed Association noted the need for the project but added that the environmental qualities also need to be considered. The Taunton River, Buzzards Bay and the region's watersheds are important to the enjoyment of the area and the economy. She cautioned that environmental values must be respected.

Mayor Edward Lambert stated his respect for the work of the Task Force and its volunteers. He noted that many environmental groups support the project. He expressed appreciation for the presence of the Lt. Governor and the Secretary, which he sees as commitment to the project. He respected Mr. Bullard's position that the Task Force is not an advocacy group but it was formed under the assumption that the project would happen. Commuter rail is an environmental justice issue. He knows the southern cities are being treated unfairly when he hears some people say that the people of Fall River and New Bedford don't need rail because they are not qualified for jobs in Boston. The number of young people leaving the region will continue to grow, which hurts the future of the cities. MassInc reports that gateway cities desperately need this infrastructure investment. Yes, mitigation is needed and yes, it is an expensive project. We do not want to do what has not been asked of other areas. We will work with you any way that we can, as long as it does not take away from the future residents of the cities. We want and need the project to move forward. He expressed appreciation for the Governor's support and congratulated Mayor Nunes' appointment as Director of Municipal Affairs by the Governor.

Dr. Peterson said that this area needs to learn from the experience of the Old Colony Line. This project must use smart growth principles and not put the stations in dumb places, as was done in Lakeville, Kingston and Plymouth.

Robb Johnson of The Nature Conservancy commended the work done by the Task Force. He added that even if the project is loaded with TODs, the regional growth impacts cannot be overlooked. He asked how much progress has been made in the arena of zoning and open space protection programs. What is needed from the State to make that happen? Mr. Smith responded that the region is growing anyway. The work of the Task Force is identifying areas for preservation and providing assistance. It would be nice to say the project would pay for open space protection. At least it is helping to identify where land should be protected, even in non-station communities.

Mr. Kortright asserted that the Commonwealth needs stronger, more progressive planning legislation. Transportation will facilitate growth that is already happening. He also respected Ms. Bennett's point about the Task Force. He thinks that at some point, business leaders, Mayors and the political delegation need to cooperate and work together to make the project happen.

Rep. Tony Cabral said the legislation he has filed has a provision that addresses planning and zoning changes. He worked with the Conservation Law Foundation and the Smart Growth Alliance. There is some funding that would support some planning and zoning activities where transportation investments are made.

Secretary Cohen would like to reinforce one message, and that is, that commuter rail by itself is not a panacea. It is important to focus on the issue of land use and planning in a way that is good for communities, supports the rail, and helps demand for the system. The mission of the Task Force then is to develop a really effective smart growth program that will help support the railroad. If commuter rail is not built, it will increase

dependence on the automobile, Route 24 will get worse, and there will be environmental effects of that traffic congestion. The railroad has the potential to help shape growth, help the environment, help economic development and help enrich lives. But the railroad will not do those things by itself. That needs to be underscored.

6. Next Task Force Meeting

March 14, 2007 at 4:00 PM at a location to be determined.

7. Adjournment

Mr. Smith adjourned the meeting at 2:00 PM.