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MEMORANDUM

TO: Salem-Plaistow-Windham MPO Technical Advisory Committee
FROM: Scott Bogle, RPC Senior Transportation Planner
DATE: December 3, 2004
RE: CMAQ Application for Capacity Improvements Supporting Downeaster Expansion

The Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority (NNEPRA) has submitted an application for \$1.2 Million in CMAQ funding to NHDOT for capacity improvements on the B & M Main Line West that will support implementation of a fifth daily round trip train oriented to commuter service. Specifically, the funding would underwrite part of the cost of construction of passing sidings in Newfields and Dover, as well as replacement of older welded rail in Dover and Exeter. Combined with capacity improvements in Northern Massachusetts currently being undertaken by the MBTA, this will allow expansion of passenger as well as freight service in the corridor, and a potential station stop in Plaistow. The local match for the project will be paid by the State of Maine through NNEPRA.

The project was brought before the State CMAQ Advisory Committee, which voted unanimously to support it. The project will be discussed by GACIT at its meeting earlier this month, but was tabled at the request of NHDOT because the Commissioner of the Maine DOT could not attend. Comments from the GACIT suggested that at the time of that meeting they were not inclined to support the request based on the information that had been presented to them, though no formal statement from the affected MPOs or station communities was available to them.

The Salem-Plaistow-Windham MPO has long been on record supporting the development of passenger rail service to Plaistow. This service was originally conceived as an extension of MBTA commuter rail service that currently has a northern terminus in Haverhill. In 2003 NNEPRA proposed that a Plaistow station stop could be added to the Downeaster service as an alternative to the MBTA extension.

Guilford Transportation has stated that capacity improvements north and south of Plaistow would be necessary before they would allow additional trains for the Downeaster service or a Plaistow station stop. The improvements proposed as part of this CMAQ project are necessary to meet this criterion. The proposed fifth daily round trip train is targeted by NNEPRA to begin service in the Fall of 2005, and will provide a second commute hour option more convenient for Seacoast commuters, arriving in Boston earlier in the morning and departing earlier in the afternoon than the existing commute hour service. It is likely that this will significantly boost ridership, especially in New Hampshire.

A copy of the proposal application is attached. Other reasons to support this CMAQ application include the following:

- The track improvements made as a result of this project will be made in New Hampshire and benefit our transportation system;
- No New Hampshire general fund or gas tax dollars are required for the local match for this project. They will be paid by NNEPRA, not New Hampshire;
- The project will improve the capacity and safety of the railroad for both freight and passenger service;
- The 5th train that will be added to the Downeaster service as a result of the project will provide a much better service for commuters who use the train; this improved schedule will primarily benefit New Hampshire residents using the stations of Dover, Durham and Exeter;
- The proposed project is part of a program of capacity improvements being undertaken by NNEPRA to address system deficiencies identified by Guilford Transportation. Fixing these deficiencies is necessary to safely accommodate both additional trains and additional station stops in the corridor, including a station stop in Plaistow.
- Building the Downeaster's ridership is critical to the long term survival and sustainability of the service. This project is critical to this effort because it will allow for an additional train and thereby improve the commuter orientation of the service;
- It was unanimously approved by the State CMAQ Advisory Committee, and is supported by the NH Department of Transportation.

New Hampshire has benefited greatly from the establishment of the Downeaster – in many respects to a greater degree than the State of Maine, which has spearheaded and funded the service. While ridership between Portland and Boston has declined somewhat in the last year, ridership from the NH station communities has increased significantly and is among the strongest in the system.

Regarding air quality impacts, as with most any rail project, the short term results show reductions in Volatile Organic Compound (VOC) emissions, but some increase in Nitrogen Oxide (NO_x) emissions (assuming the use of the current older locomotives). Over the longer term, as the locomotive fleet is replaced with newer engines, the emissions reductions will improve.

Recommended Action

That the TAC recommend to the MPO Policy to send letters to Ruth Griffin and the other members of the GACIT stating the support of the Salem-Plaistow-Windham MPO for the NNEPRA CMAQ application.