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## **DRAFT**

### **Statement on CMAQ Grant Proposal by the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority to fund track capacity improvements in support of Expansion of Downeaster Commuter Rail Service to Boston**

The Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority (NNEPRA) has submitted an application for \$1.2 Million in CMAQ funding to the State of New Hampshire for rail capacity improvements that will support implementation of a fifth daily round trip train oriented to Boston-bound commuter service. Specifically, the funding would underwrite 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, and improvements in Maine being funded by Maine DOT, this will support improved passenger rail service between NH and Boston, as well as between NH communities, and between NH and Maine. In addition, this project will improve rail safety, and support expansion of freight rail service, yielding both economic and air quality benefits.

The Salem-Plaistow-Windham MPO has long been on record supporting the reintroduction of passenger rail service to Southern New Hampshire, including the expansion of Downeaster service and the addition of either an Amtrak or MBTA station stop in Plaistow. The Plaistow station stop is identified specifically in the MPO's 2003-2022 Long Range Transportation Plan. The proposed fifth daily round trip train is expected by NNEPRA to begin service in the Fall of 2005, and will provide a second commute hour option for Seacoast commuters, arriving in Boston earlier in the morning and departing earlier in the afternoon to complement the existing commute hour service. Currently, weekday commute hour trains are frequently sold-out, necessitating a return to all-reserve status on these trains as of November 1, 2004.

The MPO believes that the changes to the Downeaster brought about by this project will significantly boost ridership, especially in New Hampshire. This, in turn, will help ensure the long term viability of this important transportation service. The proposed project represents a very worthwhile use of CMAQ funds for the State of New Hampshire for the following reasons:

1. The project is a cost effective use of New Hampshire's CMAQ funds. The major investments in the Downeaster have already been made by the federal government, the State of Maine and by New Hampshire's station communities. This project builds on these prior investments. The proposed \$1.2M project cost will result in an additional reduction of 1,988 VMT per day beginning in 2006 associated with the additional commute hour round trip that the track improvements will make possible. This equates to a cost of \$0.17 per VMT reduced over a period of ten years. This compares very favorably to other transit projects funded through the CMAQ program in the past funding round, which have ranged in cost between \$0.31 and \$1.67 per VMT reduced over a ten year project life.

2. The proposed 5<sup>th</sup> daily round trip that these track capacity improvements make possible will be focused on commuter service. This is the aspect of the Downeaster that has been most successful to date, has the greatest growth potential, and provides the greatest benefit to Seacoast residents for air quality improvement and congestion reduction.
3. The proposal will help ensure the long-term sustainability of the Downeaster service, and help retain this alternative mode of travel in the region. We are extremely fortunate as a state and region to have Amtrak service; this project represents an opportunity for New Hampshire to support it, without requiring the commitment of state revenues.
4. No New Hampshire General Fund or gas tax dollars are involved in the proposal; only federal funds and state dollars from Maine (via NNEPRA) will be used.
5. The proposed NH CMAQ funds will be used exclusively for track improvements in New Hampshire, matched with NNEPRA funds. Additional improvements to the line are being funded in Massachusetts by the MBTA, and in Maine by NNEPRA.
6. The proposed funds are for capital improvements only. Contrary to other assertions, none of the project funds will be used for operating subsidies. There are many precedents in New Hampshire for this sort of capital subsidy for transit projects using CMAQ funds, including park and ride lots, bus facilities, and bus purchases.
7. The proposed track improvements will benefit rail transportation in Southeastern NH in general. They will enhance the speed, safety and capacity of the freight rail system and also reduce noise and vibration of train service through affected parts of Dover, Newfields, and Exeter where welded rail will be installed.
8. The proposed track improvements are a necessary pre-requisite to establish rail service to Plaistow, which has been a longstanding goal for the Town of Plaistow and the Salem-Plaistow-Windham MPO. Plaistow and the communities around it have no access to any intercity transit service.
9. The CMAQ proposal has strong local support from both the Seacoast and Salem-Plaistow-Windham MPOs, indicated by a unanimous vote in favor of the project by the Seacoast MPO Policy Committee, as well as resolutions by each of the three NH station communities.
10. The CMAQ proposal received unanimous support from the State CMAQ Advisory Committee.

In the larger context, the both the Salem-Plaistow-Windham and Seacoast MPOs are strong supporters of creating a more balanced transportation system in our regions – one which offers more travel choices to our residents than simply the automobile. This is the direction we must move in if we are to both avoid congestion gridlock and meet future air quality mandates. For this reason, the MPOs have been strong supporters of prior CMAQ projects for both intercity rail and intercity bus enhancements. Going forward, it does not make sense to invest solely in bus service and ignore opportunities to develop our rail infrastructure. We believe that both are necessary for our transportation future, and both deserve the continued support of the GACIT.

Lastly, it should be acknowledged that New Hampshire has benefited greatly from the establishment of the Downeaster – in many respects to a greater degree than has the State of Maine, which 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. It is time for New Hampshire to provide some indirect financial support for the service by allocating a small portion of our federal CMAQ allocation for the needed track improvements.

We request the support of the GACIT for this project as an important improvement to our transportation system.

