SOUNDING board

Berkshire Line? Berkshire Flyer?

Here's the scoop on what's happening with restoration of passenger rail service from the Berkshires to NYC

BY KAREN CHRISTENSEN

The Train Campaign began in 2011 with the simple idea: that a beautiful rural region could attract new 21st century commerce by being seamlessly connected to an important global hub. Since then, western Massachusetts has become a hotbed of rail activism, with so many projects being discussed that a lot of people are now confused.

Our volunteers and supporters seem to agree that one of the great political and environmental challenges of our time is to find better ways to connect rural and urban areas. That conviction is central to the mission of the Train Campaign: to foster a robust network of rail transportation options in Berkshire County and surrounding areas including western Connecticut and Columbia County in New York. Our catch-phrase is "REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE."

While we strongly support the major East-West Passenger Rail Study and other Boston-focused initiatives, I'm writing today to provide clarity about the restoration of the Housatonic Line, more commonly known as the Berkshire Line, which provided passenger service until 1971.

Restoration of the Berkshire Line will result in an active, year-round service with six to eight trains per day in each direction from Grand Central Terminal in New York City, with stops in at least six towns, and terminating in Pittsfield. The Berkshire County towns identified as key station locations are Great Barrington and Lee, and there will be a station in Canaan, Conn., and/or Sheffield.

Karen Christensen is founder of The Train Campaign, which advocates for a return of passenger rail service between New York City and the Berkshires.

The line will also provide train service for those seeking to travel up and down Berkshire County – from Pittsfield to Lee to Great Barrington.

You'll have read in last month's *BERKSHIRE TRADE & COMMERCE* about another initiative, the Berkshire Flyer. I'd like to explain the difference between the two projects and put to bed the idea that they are in competition. The Berkshire Flyer and the Berkshire (Housatonic) Line are very different concepts that will serve different places and different users, and have different passenger capacity. It is quite possible that they both have a place in a comprehensive, efficient rail system.

Until 1971, the Berkshire Line carried passengers from Grand Central Terminal to Danbury, Conn., and up through western Connecticut along the Housatonic River. (You can see what this was like. We've posted a clip from the documentary "The Last Train to Pittsfield" at traincampaign.org). The tracks remain in place and have continued to serve as a freight line by the privately held Housatonic Railroad Company (HRRC).

Our goal is to see passenger service restored on the Berkshire Line, and there have been extensive efforts made to ensure that this happens. There have indeed been ups and downs, but here's some history and an overview of the massive upgrade now underway on the Massachusetts portion of the line.

In 2010, the HRRC commissioned a study of the demand for passenger service and determined that restoring passenger rail service to Berkshire County would provide two million single-fare passengers with a fast, convenient and comfortable connection to Connecticut and New York City.

In 2014, legislators on Beacon Hill passed a transportation bond bill that included money for the project in Massachusetts, first by purchasing the 37 miles of track in the state from HRRC for $13 million and also making a commitment to upgrading the line, with some (but by no means all) of that future expenditure contingent on Connecticut's involvement in upgrading the line in that state.

The purchase documents were clear about the commitment being made: "The acquisition of the subject Railroad Assets is one step in what MassDOT anticipates will be an involved, multi-step process that ultimately will lead to the establishment of a new railroad passenger service route in the Northeast."

After Gov. Deval Patrick stepped down in early 2015, MassDOT downgraded the project, saying that they would not continue the effort because Connecticut wasn't interested – and was, in fact, facing major financial difficulties.

Steps forward

In a surprising reversal, however, upgrade work on the line did begin in July 2018, and a $30 million infrastructure project is currently underway right here in Berkshire County. The track and tie work is scheduled for completion in 2020, and further work on the line is planned for 2020 to 2024. It is, of course, passenger service that will justify this major taxpayer investment.

This positive step forward has also been supported by recent developments in Connecticut. This May, Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont released a draft transportation bill that includes the extension of Metro-North service past Danbury to New Milford, and Danbury Mayor Mark Boughton recently announced that the city is making plans for a restored rail link to Southeast on the Maybrook Line for faster commuting to New York City. Both these pieces of railroad line are sections of the Berkshire Line. To paraphrase the late astronaut Neil Armstrong, "One small step to New Milford, and one giant leap towards extending passenger rail to the Berkshires."

Restoration of passenger service on the Berkshire Line is a completely different project from the Berkshire Flyer, a seasonal weekend service between Pittsfield and New York City run by Amtrak via Albany. That initiative is modeled after the CapeFLYER, which brings summer weekend tourists from Boston to Cape Cod.

What confuses many is that the Berkshire Flyer route via Albany is not the route state Sen. Adam Hinds and New York City consultant Eddie Sporn originally proposed. In fact, that route, a new railroad line from the Amtrak Hudson track straight to Pittsfield, seems to be completely off the table because of costs and engineering challenges. Sen. Hinds has, however, expressed hope that there might be a stop added in West Stockbridge as the train proceeds from Albany to Pittsfield, although MassDOT's 2018 report referred only to a possible station in Chatham, N.Y.

That question of an additional stop remains to be resolved, as does the question of possibly expanding the service beyond weekends should the pilot program prove successful.

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Expanding the Berkshire Flyer beyond weekend service would at least address one of the criticisms of the plan: that it is too limited and rigid in its schedule meet the needs of those wishing to use it. The weekend Berkshire Flyer service is not, however, as inflexible as people think.

Because there is already daily passenger service from Pittsfield to New York on the Albany route, Berkshire Flyer riders in either direction wishing to depart or return on their own schedule would only have to purchase separate tickets for the regular daily service. (Unlike the Berkshire Flyer, that daily Amtrak service requires changing trains in Albany). Once the Berkshire Flyer starts in 2020, it will be perfectly feasible to take the Flyer one direction and another train the other direction.

Who benefits?

Within a discussion of the various proposals for restoring passenger rail service, the important question is: Who benefits? Calculating the myriad benefits of passenger rail is something we're working on at the Train Campaign. We think about this, talk about it, and encourage its inclusion in state-funded studies because departments of transportation are focused only on moving people from one point to another. Calculating benefits just isn't their focus. We, on the other hand, consider it essential to calculate return on investment in terms of the environment, public health, economic vitality, and employment and educational opportunities – and tax revenue, too.

Perhaps the biggest difference between the Berkshire Flyer and Berkshire Line is the people they will serve. The Berkshire Flyer is for weekend tourists, and specifically for people who do not already come here. The Berkshire Line, on the other hand, is quite different. While its market includes tourists and second-home owners, it will also serve county residents who need to be able to get to New York regularly, and their friends and business colleagues who will suddenly have convenient access to the towns of western Connecticut and Massachusetts.

Critics of the Berkshire Flyer should remember that it is a relatively low-cost way to expand rail options since it requires only an operating subsidy in addition to marketing and management costs

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(approximately $340,000 for 20 round trips per year, each carrying up to about 50 passengers at Amtrak ticket prices). Restoring service on the Berkshire Line – including all engineering and safety upgrades, new stations and operating equipment – will cost much more, with both capital and operating costs ($200 to $250 million in capital costs, and planned break-even on ticket sales at prices comparable to Metro-North). Indeed, Massachusetts is already doing a substantial part of the work required on its 37 miles of track, but there remains much to be done.

The return on investment, however, will be much greater with the Berkshire Line, serving as many as two million single-fare riders each year, and invigorating small cities like Danbury as well as the towns of northwest Connecticut and Berkshire County. It will also give all these towns the possibility of connecting in Pittsfield to Boston on new East-West passenger rail, a project spearheaded by state Sen. Eric Lesser.

We were delighted to see that the Berkshire Line is the top line item in a priority table included in the draft Berkshire County 2020 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP), a long-range (25-year) comprehensive document that provides the basis for future transportation investment and planning in the region.

We can all agree that restored and drastically improved passenger rail service to New York and to Boston will be a catalyst for sustainable economic development. It will give city dwellers access to our wonderful towns and cultural venues, to beautiful countryside and outdoor recreation. It will offer country dwellers much easier access to employment and educational opportunities.

We are looking forward to the day when we can say to business associates in Europe or Asia, "Just go to Grand Central and buy a ticket for Great Barrington." We're also hoping to see the service become so successful that we'll have a modern version of the 1940s Berkshire Express: Train No. 144, which offered a limited-stop service every afternoon except Sundays, with a parlor car and a "broiler buffet."

Please jump aboard the Train Campaign. Find out how at www.traincampaign.org.◆

EDITOR'S NOTE: Karen Christensen is founder of The Train Campaign (www.traincampaign.org), which advocates for a return of passenger rail service between New York City and the Berkshires. The organization provides educational materials, meets with legislators and local government officials, and provides extensive maps, links, background documents and podcasts (www.traincampaign.org). The Train Campaign recently joined with Trains in the Valley and Citizens for a Palmer Rail Stop to form the Western Mass Rail Coalition (www.westernmassrail.org). Christensen owns and runs Berkshire Publishing Group, and is the author of a series of popular environmental books including The Armchair Environmentalist (Hachette 2008) that have been translated into French, German, Swedish, Japanese, Korean and Thai. She was also senior academic editor of the Encyclopedia of Community (Sage).

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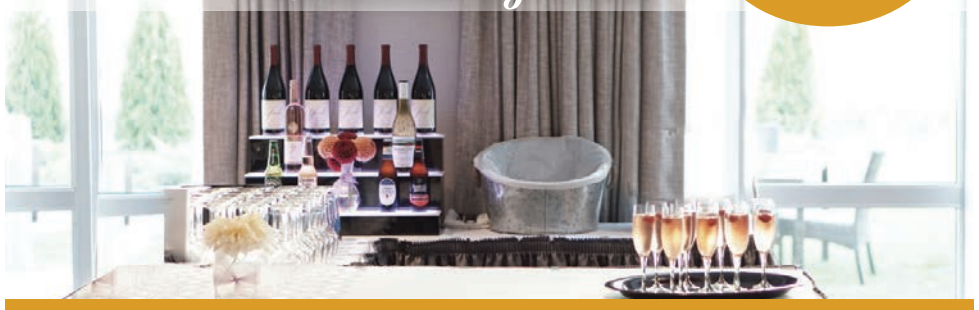

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