

1.0 Project Description

The Extension of the Fitchburg Commuter Rail Project (Project) proposes to reinstate passenger service approximately 4.5 miles to the west of the present terminus of the MBTA's existing Fitchburg Commuter Rail Line in downtown Fitchburg. This extension is proposed along an active freight corridor owned and operated by Pan Am Southern LLC, a railroad entity. A proposed new Wachusett Station would be within close proximity to an interchange at Routes 2 and 31. This ease of access to Route 2 is expected to encourage motorists to switch to transit, thereby decreasing greenhouse gas emissions associated with vehicular trips.

The Project is also expected to provide a number of direct and indirect economic benefits to the Montachusett region, and is being considered for federal funding under the TIGER (Transportation Infrastructure Generating Economic Recovery) Discretionary Grant program with the support of Congressman John Olver; the Mayors of Fitchburg, Gardner and Leominster; the Westminster Board of Selectmen; the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission; and others.

Reintroducing passenger service west of Fitchburg Station is consistent with eight of the nine adopted Montachusett Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) policies and is included in the Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) for both the Montachusett and Boston MPOs. Construction of a new Wachusett Station is included in the Montachusett MPO Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) for the Federal Fiscal Year 2010. The Project is also consistent with the goals of the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy. Finally, it is consistent with the goals of the Northern Worcester County Economic Target Area (ETA) to improve transportation infrastructure and create and retain jobs. This Project is the region's top transportation priority.

The Project involves construction of a new passenger station and appurtenant facilities, and requires the relocation of train staging functions for both the MBTA and Pan Am Southern, as well as upgrades to one of the two existing mainline tracks from the present terminus of the Fitchburg Line to a proposed MBTA layover facility approximately 1.5 miles west of the proposed Wachusett Station. These Project components and their potential environmental impacts are described further below. Figure 1 provides a USGS locus of the Project components.

1.1.1 Proposed Station and Appurtenant Facilities

The proposed passenger station itself will be located largely within the limits of Pan Am Southern's existing right of way (ROW) in the City of Fitchburg, immediately adjacent to the existing mainline, and will consist of a full-length, high-level platform, equipped with an unheated passenger shelter, benches, lighting, and bicycle storage facilities. The station will be fully accessible per the standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Parking for approximately 285 cars will be located on adjacent industrially-zoned parcels within the "231 Industrial Park" (previously reviewed in 1990 under MEPA as EOEA File #8261), with access to the parking lot and passenger platform via Authority Drive, which is located less than one-half mile off Route 2. To reduce cut-through traffic on Fifth Massachusetts Turnpike, establishment

of a cul-de-sac is proposed prior to the parking lot, with break-away bollards to allow access for emergencies.

Figure 2 provides an aerial image of existing conditions in the vicinity of the proposed station and indicates the approximate limits of the proposed station and parking. A passenger station was previously operated in this general vicinity; however the prior station involved stopping a train set on the mainline tracks, and was discontinued due to the absence of an agreement between the MBTA and Guilford, the owners of the ROW at the time. Pan Am Southern, the current owner of the ROW, is cooperating in the development of the proposed Project with the understanding that the new station and layover facility will not impede freight service that currently operates on the track. At present, this stretch of track runs approximately ten freight trains per day, some of which are as long as 7,000 feet (for comparison, the Fitchburg Commuter rail train sets are approximately 850 feet in length). Pan Am Southern is pursuing various improvements to this Class I freight corridor in anticipation of increasing service between Mechanicsville, NY and Ayer, MA, two large “inland ports” that provide connections to other freight corridors. The ROW is, and will continue to be, an important, active freight corridor serving all of New England.

Separate station tracks in the vicinity of the proposed station are required to access the proposed station platform while continuing to allow freight service on the mainline to run unimpeded by passenger rail operations. Although portions of the proposed station and parking facilities are located in partially vegetated area, the ROW is actively maintained and the industrial park parcels are previously disturbed areas, portions of which are traversed by electric transmission lines that are periodically cleared. The station will be approximately 15 feet below the grade of residential properties located on Fifth Massachusetts Turnpike (the nearest structure is 280 feet from the proposed station track, only 20 feet closer than the existing freight mainline), providing topographic shielding of sound associated with the passenger trains (as also occurs with ongoing freight service). Grading activities will also be required to establish the parking facilities.

1.1.2 Relocated Staging Functions

1.1.2.1 MBTA Layover Facility

The MBTA currently utilizes a layover facility located to the east of the Fitchburg station. From an operational standpoint, a location further beyond the terminus of the service, which is now proposed 4.5 miles further west of the present terminus, is the most efficient. Further, the existing layover facility is both smaller than desirable and outdated. Therefore, the proposed location for a new layover facility will result in long-term benefits from cost and service perspectives. Given the specific requirements for a layover facility (e.g., ability to store train sets approximately 1000-feet in length at a relatively flat grade), siting it has focused on property associated with Westminster Business Park (previously reviewed by the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) under MEPA at various times, most recently in 2008, under EEA file #8074, during which an intensive (locational) archaeological survey was undertaken and one significant archaeological site was identified). Alternative locations that were considered were rejected due to significant grading issues and/or wetland impacts. MART initially identified a highly

disturbed portion of the Westminster Business Park property on the east end of the industrial subdivision for siting of a new MBTA layover facility, located approximately 1.4 miles west of the proposed passenger station.

MART met with the owners of Westminster Business Park to discuss the proposed layover facility site, who are agreeable to locating the layover facility within the industrial subdivision. However, as an alternative to locating the facility on the eastern end of the industrial subdivision, the property owners have requested that consideration be given to locating the layover facility on a presently wooded parcel about 0.8 miles further west of the initial proposal, roughly located in the center of the subdivision (“Parcel I-8” as identified in that project’s MEPA submissions and outside of the areas identified as archaeologically sensitive). The I-8 parcel alternative eliminates the need for trains to cross the Business Park access road, which would be necessary if the eastern site were used and avoids the significant archaeological site within the business park. The site will be graded (largely fill) to allow for the construction of six stub-ended tracks for storage of locomotives and passenger cars. Figure 3 illustrates the approximate layout of the alternative locations for the proposed layover facility on a recent aerial photograph.

1.1.2.2 Pan Am Southern Staging

With the conversion of the existing double track owned by Pan Am Southern to passenger service, re-establishment of a double track in Gardner is being considered to accommodate staging of freight trains. This stretch of the existing ROW supports an intact, well-maintained rail bed that previously supported active freight service, and is currently used for vehicular access (see Figure 4). The nature of proposed disturbance is limited to placement of ties, rail, and addition of only that amount of ballast necessary to stabilize the new track on the maintained rail bed. No excavation is proposed to re-establish a second track on the existing rail bed. Minor grading (i.e., smoothing) of the surface of the existing rail bed will be undertaken prior to placement of ties, steel rails, and additional ballast.