



The State of New Hampshire
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES



Thomas S. Burack, Commissioner

March 31, 2011

The Honorable Jim B. Rausch, Chairman
Senate Transportation Committee
Legislative Office Building
Concord, NH 03301

Re: House Bill 218 – repealing the New Hampshire Rail Transit Authority

Dear Chairman Rausch and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on behalf of the Department of Environmental Services (DES) regarding HB 218, repealing the New Hampshire Rail Transit Authority. The Rail Authority was established to evaluate the potential for development of commuter and passenger rail service in New Hampshire. DES supported the creation of the Rail Authority in 2007 because of the potential air quality benefits to be gained through increased passenger and freight rail availability in the state. Toward that end, the Rail Authority has provided a beneficial public forum in which to fully vet issues associated with the future of passenger rail in New Hampshire. In concert with evaluation of passenger rail comes the added benefit of information necessary to improve the movement of freight in the state.

Motor vehicles travel over 42 million miles daily on New Hampshire roadways. Many New Hampshire residents commute daily to their jobs in Massachusetts and over the past decade the number of miles driven by commuters has increased dramatically, increasing the percentage of household income spent on fuel, and increasing congestion on New Hampshire roadways. New Hampshire's economy would benefit from reducing fuel costs for our residents, particularly as we head, once again, toward \$4 per gallon gasoline. Reducing the number of commuter vehicles by developing transportation alternatives, such as passenger rail and increased bus service, will alleviate congestion on New Hampshire's highways and reduce air pollution that negatively impacts the quality of life in the state.

A multi-modal approach to transportation is more effective at reducing single-occupant vehicle travel and thereby reducing congestion. In New Hampshire, the success of Amtrak's Downeaster service on the Seacoast, in conjunction with expanded bus service, has shown that a multi-modal approach is complementary and synergistic, resulting in greater ridership on both services.

The New Hampshire State Rail Plan¹ is currently under review and update. It cites the economic importance of the state's 459 mile rail system and the need to plan for and maintain an effective system. The Plan goes on to state that "rail planning is an important component of the state's overall transportation planning process" and that the statewide transportation system would benefit from a Statewide Passenger Rail Plan that would examine the needs of various regions in the state that can be addressed by some form of passenger rail, and the feasibility of any passenger rail initiative relative to costs, benefits, and funding. This Passenger Rail Plan is needed to

¹ <http://www.nh.gov/dot/org/aerorailtransit/railandtransit/documents/NHRailPlan.pdf>

provide “the base line data on which to build public-private cooperative efforts that would advance both public initiatives and benefit the private rail operators.”

The work underway by the Rail Authority, funded entirely with federal and other non-state dollars, is in essence the Passenger Rail Plan called for in the NH State Rail Plan. This plan can provide the State with valuable information necessary to fully evaluate all multi-modal options and determine if and where this approach is likely to be successful in the state. If the Rail Authority is abolished the federal funds to conduct the rail plan study will be lost. We encourage the committee to allow the Rail Authority to continue their work. If, based on the information the study generates, the Legislature determines the work of the Authority is not needed, then it can decide at that time to repeal it.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on HB 218. Should you have further questions or need additional information please feel free to contact Robert R. Scott, Director, Air Resources Division (271-1088, robert.scott@des.nh.gov) or Rebecca Ohler, Transportation and Energy Programs Manager (271-6749, rebecca.ohler@des.nh.gov) of his staff.

Sincerely,


for Thomas S. Burack
Commissioner

cc: HB 218 sponsors
Peter Burling, Chair, NHRTA