

Mayors urge more Amtrak shuttles between Springfield and Vermont

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Courtesy Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc., of Boston

This artist's rendering shows how an old passenger platform at the former Union Station on Pleasant Street will be upgraded to serve as its initial station. The 40-foot platform will include an awning and cover compatible with the architecture of the building

NORTHAMPTON — The mayors of Northampton, Greenfield and Holyoke are lobbying the state to increase the number of daily Amtrak shuttles planned for their communities when new high-speed passenger rail service begins next year.

The extension of the New Haven/Springfield Amtrak Shuttle north will provide a significant economic boon to both the region and to their respective communities, the three mayors said in a letter this week to Richard A. Davey, the state's transportation secretary.

“We believe this new service will deliver many positive economic impacts for downtown/urban revitalization, tourism, residential quality of life and business/job development,” the letter states.

Northampton Mayor David J. Narkewicz wrote the letter, which was also signed by Greenfield Mayor William F. Martin and Holyoke Mayor Alex B. Morse.

Return of Amtrak service to the west side of the Connecticut River is part of a larger \$73 million federal project known as the Knowledge Corridor, the high-speed passenger rail system running from Connecticut to Vermont.

Those plans call for a 2014 shift in the Amtrak Vermonter's current alignment, which takes it through Amherst and Palmer before getting to Springfield, to a more direct southern route through new stations in Greenfield, Northampton and Holyoke.

Plans call for one daily Amtrak shuttle in both directions, but both Narkewicz and Terry Masterson, the city's economic development director, believe that there is an opportunity to increase the number of trips between the state of Vermont and Springfield.

Amtrak currently makes six daily round-trips from New Haven to Springfield, and the mayors believe the schedule allows for some of those trips to extend north through their communities.

“We wanted to strike while the iron is hot and lobby the DOT to consider this option,” Narkewicz said. “Amtrak ridership is really on the rise right now.”

Rail ridership has increased significantly nationally and in the region over the last 15 years. Amtrak ridership in Amherst surged 50 percent from 2006 to 2012, from 8,700 to 13,000 passengers, and Springfield ridership rose 30 percent in the same time period, from 110,260 to 143,600 passengers.

Extending the Springfield shuttle north to new stations in Holyoke, Northampton and Greenfield would increase these ridership numbers further, the mayors said.

Greenfield recently opened a new multimodal transportation center along the route, and Northampton will upgrade an old passenger platform at the former Union Station on Pleasant Street to serve as its initial station.

The 40-foot platform will include an awning and cover compatible with the architecture of the building.

Work on the station is expected to start later this year and be completed early next spring, Masterson said.

“There’s really a lot of exciting ridership potential here,” he said.

Masterson said the cities are looking toward Amtrak’s Downeaster service between Boston and Portland, Maine, as a model.

Ridership along that route rose to record heights in 2011-12, with nearly 530,000 riders in the fiscal year, according to the organization that manages the Portland-to-Boston train service that includes stops in about a dozen communities.

Closer to home, the increased rail service would strengthen Northampton’s arts, cultural and tourism assets, offering a three-hour travel time to New York City.

Trains will cruise at 70 to 75 mph between stops, giving commuters to New Haven, New York and points south a convenient option to compete with driving.

The service would help spur residential and downtown revitalization in Greenfield, while Holyoke would see a strengthening of its downtown assets including the Green High Performance Computing Center and Canal Walk, the letter states.

The mayors said they appreciate Gov. Deval Patrick’s proactive efforts to strengthen regional rail assets with the rerouting of the Amtrak Vermonter and by negotiating to acquire the right-of-way for the Springfield to Vermont rail line.

“These landmark efforts, along with the extension of the Springfield shuttle, can be a solid foundation for positive growth in our communities and the entire region,” they wrote.

Davey, the state’s transportation chief, is expected to visit Greenfield and speak before the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce May 24.