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DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION  
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GOVERNOR

Bruce A. Van Note  
COMMISSIONER

To: Portland Transportation Center (PTC) Stakeholders and All Interested Parties

Re: PTC Study: Consultant Recommendations and MaineDOT's Proposed Path Forward

From: Bruce A. Van Note, Commissioner  
Jennifer Brickett, Director, Bureau of Planning  
Nathan Moulton, Director, Freight and Passenger Services

Date: February 3, 2021

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**Executive Summary**

From 2019 and into the fall of 2020, MaineDOT through its consultant led a group of principal stakeholders in the study of facility needs of intercity bus and rail service currently located at the Portland Transportation Center at Thompson's Point Road in Portland, Maine. MaineDOT's goal was to collect data and information and attempt to seek consensus on how to best address immediate and long term needs of intercity bus, rail, and related modes from a customer and regional system perspective.

Questions considered by the study included how and where to invest in terminal improvements, whether bus and rail service should remain in one location, whether a new rail facility makes sense, and if so where, and how we assure that any scenario maximizes customer and system benefit and is cost-effective. The result of this study is the 80± page objective report entitled "Portland Transportation Center - Customer and Transportation System Study" prepared by HNTB Corporation dated December 2020 (PTC Study Report).

As will be seen, achieving a single, commonly-held vision of a path forward proved challenging due to the reasonable but differing perspectives of the stakeholders. The purpose of the memorandum is to set forth MaineDOT's proposed path forward that best balances the short-term and long-term needs of travelers, the system, and stakeholder perspectives, and to provide with supporting rationale.

To do so, the essential recommendations of the PTC Study Report are set forth immediately below, followed by MaineDOT's conclusions and proposed path forward. Thereafter, because the proposed path forward varies in some respects from the report recommendations, this memo then summarizes the background, study process, stakeholder input, and significant consultant findings and recommendations that provided the context and rationale for MaineDOT's proposal.

Essential Recommendations from Study. Pursuant to request of MaineDOT, the PTC Study Report contains the consultant's independent findings and recommendations based upon their objective professional analysis of information available to date. This report contains three essential recommendations.

- In the short-term (within two years), create an investment, operation and maintenance plan for the existing PTC. This is necessary in any event.
- Also in the short-term, conduct a more detailed evaluation of Alternative 8, which calls for CCL bus terminal to remain at the PTC and for a new rail facility at or near the former Union Station site.
- In the longer-term, if that more detailed evaluation yields an adequate benefit cost ratio, funding should be secured and Alternative 8 should be developed upon certain conditions including increased connectivity between the bus and rail stations, the support of NNEPRA, directly impacted landowners, and the City.

MaineDOT's Proposed Path Forward. After carefully analyzing the PTC Study Report finding and recommendations, business and operational differences between key stakeholders, property owner input, and the impact of COVID-19 on public transportation ridership, MaineDOT proposes the following path forward.

1. MaineDOT, CCL, and NNEPRA will immediately work together to create an investment, operation and maintenance plan for the existing PTC including a renegotiation and extension of the lease.
2. MaineDOT will post this Memorandum and the PTC Study Report online and solicit further comments for use by all involved including the stakeholders and will again brief appropriate City staff and officials and PACTS.
3. Operational differences and business needs of the Downeaster and CCL and the possibility for a public-private partnership (PPP) as communicated by NNEPRA staff supports further exploration of a separate rail facility on the railroad mainline.
4. With concurrence of the NNEPRA board, MaineDOT will support NNEPRA in taking the lead on evaluating the viability pursuing PPP or other funding opportunities for a new rail facility on the railroad mainline between Congress Street and the Veterans Memorial Bridge overpass in accordance with the following guiding principles.
  - a. The new rail facility will be open to the public.
  - b. There will be adequate facilities for connecting modes of access to the new rail facility including a drop and kiss area, parking for Downeaster users, taxis, transit buses, and bicycle and pedestrian facilities.
  - c. Appropriate shuttle connections between a new rail station and the current PTC will be provided.

- d. If developed as part of a PPP, a long-term (20+ year) relationship with the private partner will clearly define responsibility for capital and operating costs of a new facility.
  - e. Operating costs for the new rail facility will remain in line with current costs at the current PTC.
  - f. There will be support – or at least no significant opposition - from the City of Portland or from the owners of property upon which the new rail facility is to be located.
5. In the event that a written agreement for a viable development opportunity does not materialize in two years, or within such other time period as mutually agreed upon by MaineDOT and NNEPRA, then MaineDOT will then update the needs, findings and recommendations contained in the PTC Study Report and pursue development of appropriate improvements.

## **Supporting Context and Rationale**

### **1. Background**

The Portland Transportation Center (PTC) at Thompson’s Point Road in Portland, Maine, has served as a regional hub for intercity transportation since 1996 when Concord Coach Lines (CCL) built the PTC and began its intercity bus service. In 2001, with the addition of the Amtrak’s Downeaster service, which is managed by Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority (NNEPRA), the PTC has been a multimodal regional facility for almost 20 years. The Downeaster began with service between Portland and Boston, and later extended service north to Brunswick in 2012. The PTC terminal and property including its parking lot is owned and managed by CCL, while the Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT) owns an adjacent Park and Ride Lot on the north side of Thompson’s Point Road that serves both bus and train customers.

There were at least three factors that necessitated a strategic look at the PTC. First, until the COVID pandemic, the PTC and the surrounding transportation system has seen growth that strained the existing facility. In 2019, there were about 745,000 passengers who used the PTC, with CCL bus customers accounting for about 73% and the Downeaster train customers accounting for about 27%.<sup>1</sup> These volumes drove the need for consideration of capital investment including terminal renovation, site improvements, additional parking capacity, and added train platform capacity. Second, since the 2012 extension of Downeaster Service to Brunswick, the need to back trains into the existing PTC causes several minutes of travel time for train passengers traveling to stops north of Portland (Freeport and Brunswick) that could be

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<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 has caused severe and sustained drops in ridership. Intercity bus and train have been down by 85 to 90% most weeks compared to a year ago.

eliminated with a mainline rail terminal. Lastly, the original lease and related financial arrangements for colocation of CCL and the Downeaster, originally brokered by MaineDOT, has expired, and there are various other business and operational considerations of CCL and NNEPRA that required collaboration and resolution.

## **2. Study Purpose, Participants and Phases**

These challenges and opportunities prompted the MaineDOT to retain HNTB Corporation (HNTB or consultant) to conduct this PTC Study in the spring of 2019. MaineDOT's goal of the Study was to seek consensus on how to best address immediate and long term intercity bus, rail, and related linkages needs from a customer and regional transportation system perspective. Questions to be considered included how and where to invest in terminal improvements, whether bus and rail service should remain in one location, and if so where, whether a new rail terminal location makes sense, and if so where, and how we assure that any scenario maximizes customer benefit and is fiscally responsible. Principal Stakeholders in the Study included CCL, NNEPRA, MaineDOT, the City of Portland, and METRO. The Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG) and the Portland Area Comprehensive Transportation System (PACTS) supported this study by providing local and regional information and staff resources. Additional stakeholders – including other affected landowners - were engaged as needed to contribute to Study analysis and findings. We thank all participants for their engagement.

The PTC Study was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 – conducted from June 2019 to January 2020, centered on evaluating efficiency relative to meeting customer needs and realizing transportation benefits at existing and potential new locations as well as understanding the feasibility and potential benefits and costs of relocating bus and/or rail facilities. Nine alternatives were considered in Phase 1. Customer input was gathered through customer survey of existing passengers using the PTC in the summer of 2019.

Phase 1 results were inconclusive and failed to result in consensus of key project stakeholders and pointed to the need to reconsider assumptions. Accordingly, with lessons learned from the first phase, MaineDOT authorized HNTB to conduct a Phase 2 Alternatives Analysis from February 2020 and into the Fall 2020. Phase 2 included more focused and detailed stakeholder input concerning operational and business needs, assumptions, supporting data, and other potential terminal locations. Phase 2 focused on continuing the evaluation of relocating the rail station to the mainline including re-examining the benefits and costs of the wye track, maintaining CCL operations at the PTC on Thompsons Point Road, and completing a more detailed evaluation of bus and rail parking needs.

Four additional alternatives were analyzed in Phase 2 (bringing the total number of alternatives considered in both phases to thirteen). Two of the Phase 2 alternatives (Alternatives 5 and 6) call for intercity bus *and* rail continuing at or near the PTC on Thompsons Point Road. The two other alternatives call for only intercity bus to remain at the PTC and a proposed new rail facility on the railroad mainline at two different locations between Congress Street and the Veterans Memorial Bridge overpass: one being off St. John Street known as the Ferguson site (Alternative 7) and one at near the location of the former Union Station near Congress Street (Alternative 8). Conceptual layouts of each alternative are shown in the draft PTC Study Report on pages 50 through 54.

The PTC Study Report is the result of both phases. This memo will hereafter focus on Phase 2. Addressing the transportation impacts of the pandemic statewide accounted for most of the time it took for MaineDOT to consider the draft report and prepare its position in this draft memo. We apologize for the delay.

### **3. Stakeholder Perspectives**

Achieving a single vision for a path forward proved challenging due to the reasonable but differing perspectives of the stakeholders.

- NNEPRA staff and rail advocates have supported relocation of rail terminal to the mainline track somewhere between the RR junction of Mountain Division line and the Veterans Memorial Bridge overpass due to reduce travel time caused by the train backing issue and to maximize future opportunities to expand ridership and service. NNEPRA staff generally has favored Alternative 7 (the Ferguson site).
- CCL and intercity bus system advocates support the current PTC location due to its easy and immediate access to I-295, parking availability, their substantial private capital investments at the PTC, and the lower costs associated with upgrading an existing facility.
- The City of Portland has provided varied informal input and has not taken a definitive position. City staff have informally observed potential long-term planning benefits of the Union Station site (Alternative 8). On May 20, 2020, the three Portland City Councilors on the Council's Sustainability & Transportation Committee generally supported NNEPRA's perspective, with at least one Councilor calling the relocation of the train terminal as advocated by NNEPRA staff as "imperative".
- METRO staff opined that local transit connections could be maximized at the site of the former Union Station.
- Affected private landowners of sites near Mercy hospital and the former Union Station were always courteous and open to discussion, but they expressed concerns about having a future terminal on their properties due to their future development visions and plans.

- MaineDOT is obligated to develop long-range, comprehensive, balanced plans that promote the coordinated and efficient use of all modes of transportation. See 23 MRS §4206(1)(A) and (C). Accordingly, MaineDOT sought alternatives that maximized long-term customer and transportation system benefits in a modally-agnostic manner, seriously considered the customer convenience of continuing to have both bus and rail services co-located, and had potentially favorable benefit-cost attributes.

#### **4. Significant Consultant Findings and Recommendations**

Given the varying perspectives noted above, MaineDOT emphasized to HNTB that it was to provide MaineDOT with its independent findings and recommendations based upon its objective analysis of information available to date.

- a. Significant General Findings. The draft PTC Study Report contains the following significant findings.
  - Wye Track. An updated Wye track evaluation identified no operating time benefit (p.55).
  - Mode of Access to Station(s). Today, 55% of passengers (bus and rail) are dropped off at the PTC by private vehicles, 41% drive and park, and the remaining 4% used local bus, walk or bicycle. By 2040, regardless of the alternative selected, between 54 and 57% will be dropped off by private vehicles, 34 to 35% will drive and park, 6% will arrive by local bus, and between 2 and 6% will walk or bicycle (p. 57). Alternative 8 (former Union Station site) provides the maximum opportunity to increase local transit trips due to the proximity to the greatest number of transit lines (p. 66). Alternative 8 is also located the closest to downtown of any alternative and provides a direct connection to the Portland Trail system, which slightly increases pedestrian and bicycle trips over Alternative 7.
  - Parking Needs. Under any alternative, parking will remain a key driver of operational efficacy, site selection, and project costs. The Phase 1 analysis forecasts the need for almost 1,200 parking spaces for both bus and rail passengers in 2040, with rail passengers accounting for only about 13% of this total (p. 58). With the current ground parking expansion by CCL complete, the existing PTC site will have 931 spaces. None of the alternatives have adequate space to expand ground level parking to meet forecast 2040 demand. This means to meet parking demand, all Phase 2 alternatives will require a parking structure to meet 2040 parking demands, which adds major capital costs (p.61), or using parking provided by others or remote parking with shuttles. Reductions in rail passenger boardings in Portland have reduced the overall number of parking spaces identified in the Phase 1 analysis (p. 58). Further, the construction of a West Falmouth rail station could reduce rail parking demand by up to 25 spaces (p. 65).  
  
Once an alternative is selected, a more detailed parking demand analysis is needed. (p. 58).

- Mainline Rail Station. Relocating the train station to the railroad mainline as represented by Alternatives 7 and 8 will:
    - decrease travel times for rail passengers north of Portland by 10 to 16 minutes (p. 55).
    - increase rail ridership by an estimated 58 daily riders, with 90% of the increased ridership (52 riders) being north of Portland (p. 56).
    - slightly reduce passenger vehicle emissions due to greater use of alternative modes to access a more central rail station (pp. 62 and 68).
    - separate intercity bus and rail passengers, thus likely requiring a shuttle or other connection between the bus and rail stations to preserve modal choice (p. 62).
    - potentially create the perception of an increased noise due to idling and horns/whistles at proposed rail stations due to closer proximity to residential neighborhoods (p. 62).
  - Landowner impacts. Alternatives 6, 7 and 8 require use of private property other than that of CCL, which could impact the value and viability of development of the properties affected (p. 63).
  - Benefit cost. The evaluation of costs and benefits requires more information and will change, but at this time and with current assumptions, none of the Phase 2 alternatives achieved a benefit/cost ratio of 1.0 or greater (p. 64).
- b. Summary of Findings for Each Phase 2 Alternative. Based upon the above, the consultant summarized the findings regarding each of the Phase 2 Alternatives on pages 65 and 66 as follows.
- No-build Alternative. The No-Build Alternative does not address long-term bus and rail customer needs, does not eliminate the backing up of trains, does not promote additional bus or rail ridership, does not provide adequate parking, does not increase walk and bike trips, and does not reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
  - Alternative 5: Existing PTC site, Thompsons Point, North of track. Alternative 5 provides strong benefits to customer safety. safety, meets parking demand and ability to provide necessary rail infrastructure, is a combined bus/rail station, has direct access to I-295 and the roadway network, and is the easiest alternative to implement as all improvements are on property owned by either CCL or MaineDOT. However, it does not provide any transportation benefits as there is no additional bus and/or rail ridership beyond normal growth, is not located on the rail mainline, requires a reverse move for the train into the station, and has increased O&M costs. Alternative 5 does improve customer benefits with an expanded bus/rail station, additional parking to meet demand, and rail platform and access improvements.

- Alternative 6: Thompsons Point, Both Sides of track. Alternative 6 provides similar benefits to Alternative 5 but separates the bus and rail station with the new rail station and parking located immediately adjacent to the bus station, minimizing the inconvenience to bus and rail passenger synergy. However, it does not provide any transportation benefits as there is no additional bus and/or ridership, is not located on the rail mainline and thus requires the continued backing of trains into the station and has increased O&M costs. It has the highest O&M cost increase due to separate rail and bus station staffing and parking maintenance as well as one of the highest capital costs.
- Alternative 7: On rail mainline, off St. John Street - Ferguson site. Alternative 7 improves rail operations by eliminating the backing of trains, increases train ridership by an estimated 58 riders per day, and reduces VMT, VHT, and greenhouse gases. It is located somewhat closer to downtown resulting in slight improvements in pedestrian and bicycle trips. This alternative separates bus and rail passengers into two stations and thus may require a shuttle between them, has a limited number of existing transit lines passing by, and may be incompatible with future development plans in the vicinity of St. John and Valley Streets. This alternative does not accommodate larger platforms for passenger safety or an additional rail bypass track in the future if ridership increases, which may impact future rail operations and expansion opportunities. This alternative may be perceived to increase noise from trains to nearby properties. It is one of the highest priced alternatives along with Alternatives 6 and 8.
- Alternative 8: On rail mainline, Congress St. former Union Station site. Like Alternative 7, Alternative 8 improves rail operations by eliminating the backing of trains, increases train ridership by an estimated 58 riders per day, and reduces VMT, VHT, and greenhouse gases, separates bus and rail passengers with two stations and thus may require a shuttle between them, and may be perceived as increasing noise. Alternative 8 can accommodate a bypass track and a rail center platform if future ridership increases, provides the maximum opportunity to increase local transit trips due to the proximity to the greatest number of transit lines, and is located the closest to downtown of any alternative and provides a direct connect to the Portland Trail system, which slightly increases pedestrian and bicycle trips over Alternative 7. It is one of the highest priced alternatives along with Alternatives 6 and 7.

c. Major Recommendations. As shown on page 72 of the draft PTC Report, the consultant made the following recommendations.

Starting now and within two years:

- Create Existing PTC Plan. Create an investment, operation and maintenance plan for the existing PTC that focuses on enhancing both bus and rail ridership and maximizing benefit to both the customer and transportation system.



- Further Evaluate Alternative 8. Conduct a more detailed evaluation of Alternative 8 including an analysis of creating connectivity between the bus and rail station and additional benefit cost analysis.

Thereafter, if the more detailed evaluation of Alternative 8 shows that benefits outweigh costs:

- Fund and Develop Alternative 8. Identify sources and secure funding to implement Alternative 8 under the following conditions.
  - Continued partnership with MaineDOT and CCL for the necessary improvements to the existing PTC location for bus station passengers and operations.
  - Funding can be secured.
  - Landowner willingness to work in partnership towards a mixed-use development opportunity at this location that includes a rail station.
  - NNEPRA and City of Portland support.
  - Increased connectivity between the bus and rail stations can be accommodated through increased transit or implementation of a last mile shuttle.

The consultant also recommended that to maximize customer and system benefits, transportation facilities are best held in public owner