



**PUBLIC HEALTH INSTITUTE  
OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS**  
PARTNERS FOR HEALTH EQUITY

January 27, 2023

Western Massachusetts Passenger Rail Commission  
Chair William Straus  
Chair Brendan Creighton

Dear Chairmen Straus and Creighton,

As the Executive Director of the Public Health Institute of Western Massachusetts, I am writing to encourage you to consider the many aspects of public health when it comes to choosing an entity to design and oversee passenger rail in Western Massachusetts. We work with residents and organizations all over Western Massachusetts to compile community health needs assessments and improvement plans, so we know how important more transportation options are. However, improvements to transportation must come in a way that do not worsen other aspects of life.

We ask that entities charged with designing and overseeing new passenger rail service be steeped in the concepts of health equity and the social determinants of health. We have looked at health impact assessments for rail projects around the world (*see attached References on Page 3*) and have identified these six (6) areas that are important to public health and health equity. We encourage you to select or create a public entity that will intentionally address all these important aspects of life:

- 1. Community Input.** Actively seeking input from would-be riders and other community stakeholders is essential to the success of any venture, especially multi-million-dollar infrastructure projects. We applaud the Commission for having six public hearings in this early planning phase. We want the entity overseeing Western Massachusetts Passenger Rail to commit to seeking community input and to have on their advisory board at least four (4) rider advocates.
- 2. Affordability.** A new expense of just a few dollars can tip the scale on what's affordable for people living with low incomes. The fare for Western Massachusetts Passenger Rail service needs to be *equitable*, which is not the same as *equal* for every person. MassDOT has traditionally measured public transportation success by how much money is collected from passengers—the farebox recovery ratio. We see that as a poor measure of success,

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especially when the administrative cost to simply collect fares is high. We want the responsible entity to measure success by transporting as many people as possible, as safely and efficiently as possible with as few as possible negative impacts to the environment.

- 3. Accessibility.** Excellent communications and marketing will be key to people taking full advantage of Western Massachusetts Passenger Rail. We want the entity overseeing this community asset to embrace the diversity of the region and eagerly provide bi- or multi-lingual signage and creatively get the word out so *everyone* knows they can affordably ride the train.
- 4. Air pollution.** The air quality on board a diesel train is 5x more polluted than on a busy street. (King, 2019) The Pioneer Valley Air Quality Network should be engaged to install monitors and report out air quality metrics to inform impact. The entity managing East West Rail should be charged with planning for battery- or hydrogen fuel cell-powered trains. (Vartabedian, 2021)
- 5. Design of stations and crossings.** The entity overseeing Western Massachusetts Passenger Rail should work closely with resident groups, municipalities, regional planning commissions, and regional transit authorities to create stations with safe access for pedestrians, cyclists, and wheelchair users, and bus riders, while reducing hazardous rail crossings.
- 6. Noise and Light pollution.** The entity overseeing Western Massachusetts Passenger Rail should be working with municipalities and regional planning commissions to create careful design of lighting that will not reduce quality of life for habitat (human and natural) along the rail line. Prolonged exposure to noise pollution (80 dB or above) can cause hormonal imbalances, fatigue and poor performance at school and work and Light at night- throws off circadian rhythms. (Boonwaat, et al)

The determinants of our health are greatly influenced by investments in the design and build out of infrastructure, and the lack thereof. We want the entity overseeing Western Massachusetts Passenger Rail to be thinking about—and monitoring—these six issues as they engage Western Massachusetts residents and community organizations to provide viable transportation solutions.

Thank you for your time and for considering our requests.

Sincerely,



Jessica Collins, Executive Director  
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**CC:**

Sen. Jo Comerford, Sen. Anne Gobi, Sen. Adam Gomez Rep. Natalie Blais, Rep. Lindsay Sabadosa, Rep. Todd Smola, Rep. Bud Williams, Kimberly Robinson

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