

Subtask 2.8. Ann Arbor Railroad Extension

Requirement

The contractor shall evaluate options for extending service to downtown Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan South Campus. The contractor shall also recommend a course of action to address Ann Arbor Railroad, Great Lakes Central Railroad and the Authority's needs and expectations.

Discussion

This prospective extension, connecting the proposed Plymouth Road station and the proposed University of Michigan Stadium station, raises many of the same issues pertinent to the Great Lakes Central Railroad (GLC) corridor, including track condition and speed, grade crossings, track access and liability, as well as the complications inherent with having to interface with another railroad. As with the initial phase of operation between Howell and Plymouth Road, expected ridership levels will be critical to any evaluation of the benefits and costs of extending the service into downtown Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan south campus. The additional ridership that might result from this extension has not yet been developed by the Coalition and investigation of this issue is recommended.

It is assumed that the Plymouth Road station would remain in service upon commencement of the extended service because it is most proximate to the University of Michigan Medical Center, a key source of ridership. Inbound morning trains would proceed south on the GLC, enter the Ann Arbor Railroad (AARR) at MP47.5 and proceed southward to serve the Ann Arbor – Downtown Station (approximately 1.5 miles from MP47.5) and a station adjacent to the U of M Stadium complex (Hoover St. at the north edge of the complex is MP 44.64). Commuter trains would cross the 650-foot long Huron River Bridge in the process. Inbound morning trains would be stored on the main, or on a siding (new construction) located south of the Stadium Station and next to the AARR mainline, until employed as outbound trains in the evening. During this layover, incidental cleaning of the cars' interiors would be accomplished.

Two key issues must be resolved for the extension to be implemented: (1) establishing reasonable certainty that a downtown station location, that meets the City's and Coalition's criteria, can be secured, and (2) gaining access to approximately three miles of the AARR between its northern-most point at a connection with the Great Lakes Central Railroad at MP 47.5, and a location between Hoover Street (MP 44.64) and Stadium Street.

Three potential Downtown station sites are discussed in this study: W. Washington Street (a City-owned parcel), and two in the vicinity of the intersection of W. William and 1st Streets. Downtown station sites will need to address three concerns identified by local officials: (1) proximity to the core downtown, the center-point of which is the intersection of Huron and Main Streets, (2) avoiding the blocking of city streets that see

significant traffic during the rush hours (as defined by city traffic and planning officials), and (3) mitigating the impact of the eastward uphill walk (toward Ashley Street) that passengers will encounter when walking toward downtown and University of Michigan's Central Campus.

As to the prospective University of Michigan Stadium Complex site, there appears to be space within the AARR right of way between Hoover and Stadium Streets to accommodate a station platform and one or two layover tracks. The University feels that it needs a better understanding of the size, siting and access requirements of a prospective station at this location before further assessing the site.

Characteristics of the above sites are discussed under Subtask 2.2., Station Development.

On the issue of commuter train access to AARR tracks, RLBA spoke with AARR's president and its Chief Engineer. Their positions were the same: the AARR is not interested in granting access to the commuter trains because of concern that the potential liability costs of a catastrophic accident, such as derailing a commuter train into the Huron River, would cause the owners to lose the railroad. There was also a strong implication that liability insurance costs associated with hosting commuter passenger trains would threaten AARR's profitability. They also expressed concern about commuter train interference with AARR freight train operations. Given that AARR indicates that it generally operates only one, or sometimes two, trains per day (to and from Osmer), it seems that some reasonable agreement about the scheduling of track usage should be achievable between the Wally Coalition (or authority created to operate commuter rail service) and AARR. When asked for a solution to the liability issue, AARR stated that it would want to be held completely harmless and that a second party insured be named. AARR's concern about the cost of purchasing sufficient liability insurance would be addressed by such costs being passed through to the Wally Coalition in any access agreement, or by the Coalition directly purchasing the necessary insurance coverage.

Assuming that the above concerns can be addressed to the satisfaction of AARR and the Coalition, the conditions under which the commuter trains would achieve access to the AARR would be articulated in: (1) a shared use agreement, which is common in the railroad industry or, (2) a lease or (3) purchase of the desired segment by the Coalition from AARR. It is possible that a lease or purchase would be preferable options for addressing the liability issue, since they would pass control of the railroad to the Coalition and with such control would come the responsibilities and costs associated with liability for personal injuries and losses to passengers in the event of an accident. This is not a legal opinion, and RLBA strongly recommends that the Coalition review these options with insurance professionals to assess their viability, and the cost and availability of insurance coverage.

It is important to recognize that sale or lease of the approximately three miles of AARR right of way between Plymouth Road (MP 47.5) and the University of Michigan stadium

complex (MP 44.64) appears to offer an advantage to AARR, and no disadvantage, in that there are no freight customers on this segment, and it is not likely that there will be any in the future.

The control resulting from a lease or purchase of the needed portion of the AARR line also would bring the Coalition the advantage of more control over train operations on the line. It would then have the ability to establish priority treatment of commuter operations needs, within reason, over AARR's freight operations. An example of such control would be establishing time periods during which commuter operations would have exclusive access to the track. Ultimately, however, priority treatment and other operational issues likely would be spelled out in any agreement.

Incremental train operating costs over the extension are expected to be relatively modest, given that the commuter train run would only be extended by approximately three miles. Capital costs will depend upon requirements that result from inspection of the AARR track and right of way, and design of station facilities. Capital expenses would cover construction of two new stations, installing or upgrading of walkways and railings of AARR's Huron River Bridge, upgrading the AARR track to 30 mph (FRA Class II, passenger) from its present 15 mph passenger, and possibly building storage facilities (one long or two short tracks) at which morning inbound trains would lay over until their evening outbound runs. The ability to lay over the trains on the main track would be governed by the needs of AARR's freight operations and the terms of the agreement by which the Coalition gains access to the AARR's track.

RLBA examined the condition of the rail line from public property and estimates that the condition of the track is in keeping with the 10 (freight) and 15 mph (passenger) speed limits (FRA Class 1) cited by AARR's Chief Engineer on this segment of track. Grade crossing condition was generally acceptable. Increasing the track speed limit to 30 mph (FRA Class 2, passenger) would allow the additional three miles to be covered in twelve to thirteen minutes.

Conclusions

Securing a suitable downtown station location and gaining access to a segment of the AARR by addressing AARR's concerns about potential liability costs of commuter train operations are the key challenges to extending Wally Coalition commuter service into downtown Ann Arbor.

Ridership levels that would use the extended service need to be better understood so the Coalition can evaluate the potential costs and benefits of the extension.

RLBA recommends that:

1. The City of Ann Arbor and the Coalition take the steps necessary to establish reasonable certainty that they are able to secure a downtown station location

- that meets their proximity, grade crossing and eastward uphill walking concerns.
2. The Wally Coalition obtain appropriate professional advice as to whether a lease or purchase of the needed three miles of the AARR would prove the preferable method through which necessary liability insurance could be acquired, and then negotiate an agreement with AARR.
 3. The Coalition and the University of Michigan further research the potential ridership volume and needs of the potential Stadium Complex station so the University can develop plans about the property and access that it would need to provide at this location.