



October 8, 2024

Monica Tibbits-Nutt, Secretary and CEO  
Meredith Slesinger, Rail and Transit Administrator  
David Mohler, Executive Director, Office of Transportation Planning  
Massachusetts Department of Transportation  
10 Park Plaza  
Boston, Massachusetts 02116

Dear Secretary Tibbits-Nutt, Administrator Slesinger, and Executive Director Mohler:

The North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce appreciates the opportunity to provide input on the Northern Tier Rail Study. We commend the efforts to engage diverse stakeholders across the Commonwealth in this critical initiative.

Our Chamber's Public Policy Agenda, and our regional economic development plan, [One North Central](#), underscore the critical need for enhanced transportation infrastructure throughout North Central Massachusetts. This improved connectivity is essential to not only retain our current skilled workforce but also to attract new talent and businesses, driving economic growth in our region. Furthermore, we recognize the limitations of Route 2 as a primary transportation artery, and the proposed Northern Tier Rail project presents an excellent opportunity to diversify our transit options, significantly increasing mobility while simultaneously addressing regional congestion. Importantly, this rail initiative aligns perfectly with the administration's ambitious goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, offering a sustainable transportation solution that will benefit our communities for generations to come.

While the study's various alternatives primarily focus on connecting North Adams to Boston, we strongly urge the state to recognize and capitalize on the immense potential for local service connectivity among the diverse communities along the corridor. Specifically, we advocate for the strategic incorporation of stops in Athol and Gardner, regardless of the chosen alternative. This approach would unlock transformative opportunities for intra-regional commuting within North Central Massachusetts.

The Chamber represents numerous employers whose workforces would benefit from enhanced rail connectivity, particularly with stops in the Athol and Gardner areas. These additions would not only serve existing businesses but also act as a catalyst for economic growth. As we actively work to attract new employers to our region, the presence of an efficient, accessible rail network becomes a significant competitive advantage. This improved transportation infrastructure will undoubtedly serve as a major selling point, showcasing our region's commitment to sustainable growth and workforce mobility.

Furthermore, these local stops would foster greater community interconnectedness, reduce road congestion, and provide environmentally friendly transportation options for residents. This aligns with our collective vision for a more accessible, sustainable, and economically vibrant North Central Massachusetts.

In addition to helping grow the economy by supporting our workforce and attracting new employers and talent to the region, we also believe Northern Tier Rail can address critical transportation barriers and open up new employment opportunities for residents, particularly those without personal vehicles. We urge that the proposed rail service offer seamless connectivity with regional and local transportation options, including bus services provided by the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART) and the Franklin Regional Transit Authority (FRTA), dedicated shuttle services, bikes, and on-demand transportation services.

This rail expansion also aligns perfectly with the Commonwealth's efforts to increase affordable and market rate housing through the historic Affordable Homes Act. By providing efficient transportation options to central and western Massachusetts, the Northern Tier Rail project will help to relieve housing pressures currently faced by our more urban, eastern counterparts. This enhanced mobility will open up new possibilities for sustainable development while allowing residents to travel more easily to points east, south, and west.

We also see the Northern Tier Rail project as a tremendous opportunity to boost our region's growing tourism sector. Tourism has been identified as a priority industry in our regional economic development strategy. Our data clearly shows that a substantial portion of our visitors hail from the lucrative Boston and New York markets, representing untapped potential for growth. Enhanced rail connectivity along the Northern Tier will serve as a vital conduit, increasing accessibility for these key origin markets. This improved access will invariably translate into an influx of visitors, driving substantial economic benefits across our diverse array of local businesses, from our restaurants and orchards to our parks and other unique attractions.

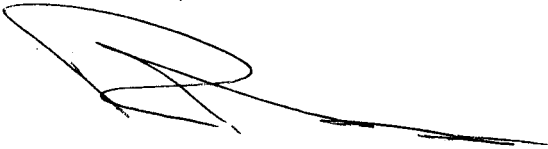
We have already witnessed the transformative impact of improved rail access in our region. Wachusett Mountain, for instance, has experienced an increase in visitors following the introduction of the Wachusett Station, underscoring the direct correlation between rail connectivity and tourism growth. We believe that additional stops along the proposed Northern Tier Rail will replicate and amplify this positive effect across our region's numerous attractions. From the scenic beauty of the Nashua River Rail Trail to the cultural richness of Fitchburg Art Museum, and the historical significance of sites like Doane's Falls in Royalston, each new stop represents a gateway to our region's diverse offerings. By facilitating easy, sustainable access to these attractions, the Northern Tier Rail will not only boost our tourism economy but also promote environmentally conscious travel, aligning with our commitment to sustainable regional development.

Moreover, we strongly advocate for a balanced approach that preserves and enhances the vital role of freight rail alongside the new passenger service. It is imperative that the implementation of the Northern Tier Rail project be carefully orchestrated to minimize disruptions to existing freight operations. By ensuring the harmonious coexistence of passenger and cargo transportation on these tracks, we can maximize the economic benefits for our region. This dual-use strategy will not only improve passenger mobility but also maintain the efficiency of our supply chains, creating a robust, multi-faceted rail system that serves diverse economic needs. We urge planners to employ innovative scheduling and infrastructure solutions that allow both passenger and freight trains to operate smoothly, avoiding delays and disruptions that could undermine the project's overall value to our communities and businesses.

We believe that the Northern Tier Rail project is not just a transportation initiative, but is a transformative influence capable of creating a more balanced and accessible Massachusetts. This

visionary project bridges critical gaps in housing, employment, and transportation, while simultaneously driving robust economic growth across our region. The ripple effects of this strategic investment will resonate for generations, fostering sustainable development, unlocking new opportunities, and markedly improving the quality of life for all our residents. We urge you to prioritize the realization of this project, with particular emphasis on including stops in Athol and Gardner to ensure comprehensive local service along the proposed route. The time for decisive action is now. By collaboratively bringing the Northern Tier Rail to fruition, we seize an unprecedented opportunity to forge a more connected, prosperous, and equitable North Central Massachusetts. The North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce stands ready to support and collaborate on this initiative in every way possible. We believe, if implemented correctly, that this project can help to unlock the full potential of our region, and can serve as a model for integrated, forward-thinking infrastructure development in the Commonwealth.

Sincerely,

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Roy Nascimento', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Roy Nascimento, CCE, IOM  
President & CEO

A smaller, more compact handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Travis Condon'.

Travis Condon  
Public Affairs Manager