The meeting opened with introductions and an overview of the I-87 Multimodal Corridor Study and an update of its status by the project team. It was also explained that the purpose of the workshop was to receive input and guidance from participants on the potential for commuter rail service in the corridor and emphasized that the meeting would be an informal roundtable discussion rather than a formal presentation by the project team. The results of this workshop and the other five sessions scheduled for the same three-week period will feed into the final corridor study report that will be prepared during Phase 2 of the project.

The study team then summarized the results High Speed Rail (HSR) Pre-Feasibility Study prepared as part of the I-87 study and led a discussion of existing and required infrastructure and equipment necessary to enhance rail service in the corridor.

The following sections summarize key points of the group’s discussion and highlight issues to be explored more fully during Phase 2. An agenda for the meeting and sign-in sheets are included as Attachments A and B.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Review of High-Speed Rail Pre-Feasibility Study

- Two different approaches were taken to consider improving the speed of rail passenger travel between Albany and Rouses Point:
  - Implementing full 150 mph HSR service throughout the corridor, with a dedicated HSR alignment.
  - Incremental improvements to existing service and facilities. These incremental improvements involve staying with the existing alignment and adjusting it in various ways that will result in increased speed and reliability.

- Both this study and a parallel study conducted by the Ministère des Transports du Québec (MTQ) found that making incremental improvements to existing service and facilities would be significantly more cost-effective than implementing full HSR service in the corridor, in terms of cost per minutes saved. Both studies also found that travel time between the U.S. and Montreal could be further reduced by eliminating the Customs stop at border and treating Customs more like the airlines do, with Customs checks performed at the origin and destination instead of at the border.
• Findings:
  
  o Travel time between Albany and Rouses Point is currently 4:35 hours and includes 9 stops.
  
  o Nineteen “incremental improvement” scenarios were considered, and the following factors were varied:
    
    o reducing the number of stops between Albany and Rouses Point;
    o utilizing tilt-train equipment or other new technologies;
    o increasing “superelevation” and permitted “underbalance” on existing track;
    o increasing the Maximum Authorized Speed;
    o upgrading signal systems and track crossing controls required for high-speed service;
    o adding sidings – important for a single-track alignment; and
    o upgrading key track segments that are now a source of delay.

Various combinations of these incremental improvements were evaluated to determine the estimated travel time savings that could be achieved. The range of time savings, relative to the present 4:35-hour travel time between Albany and Rouses Point (including 9 station stops), ranged from 40 to 60 minutes for the more moderate improvements that would utilize the same rail equipment presently used by Amtrak, to approximately 2 hours with more extensive improvements to tracks, signals, and sidings, the use of new “tilt train” rail cars, and the elimination of existing stops between Albany and Rouses Point.

Capital costs for the more moderate improvements were approximately $40 million, while the more extensive improvement options ranged from $130 to $270 million.

  o With full HSR service on a new alignment and three stops, travel time could be reduced to 1:38 minutes with an average speed of 116 mph. However, the cost of this scenario would be approximately $4 billion.

  o The MTQ study examined full HSR service between Rouses Point and Montreal under three operating scenarios (roughly 125, 150 and 186 mph) and along two separate alignments (the approximately 48-mile Canadian National (CN) alignment, on which Adirondack service trains presently travel to Gare Centrale in Montreal, and the 41-mile CP Rail alignment, which connects to the Lucien-L’Allier Station). Because the existing alignments in Quebec are relatively flat and straight, and would require relatively few departures from the existing alignments to achieve HSR speeds, the capital costs to implement full HSR service in the 41-mile Quebec segment would be approximately $179 million, as opposed to the equivalent $4 billion cost of implementing full HSR in the 191-mile Albany-to-Rouses Point portion of the corridor.
MTQ concluded that the most cost-effective improvement would be a roughly $40 million upgrade to permit approximately 110 mph service, since the same additional time savings of 125-150 mph service could not be justified given the $100-130 million additional costs.

Combining these types of incremental improvements in both the NYS and Quebec segments is the most cost-effective strategy for improving passenger rail service in the corridor. Further studies would be need to confirm costs and, especially, ridership (neither study did a detailed ridership marketing study).

Other issues:

- Because eliminating stops results in increased time savings, operators could investigate the possibility of running a several express trains in addition to those that would serve all stops along the alignment.

- Increasing the number of sidings along the alignment is critical to improving travel times and reliability. Joint maintenance to keep track up to 70 mph operation and the elimination of the Customs stop at the border would also improve reliability.

Service Concept and Inter-Relationship to Market

- The group agreed that only moderate improvements to intercity service in corridor (e.g., Albany to Montreal) can be supported. Justification for any improvements needs to be thought of in terms of freight, passenger safety, reliability, and corollary benefits to the commuter market.

- Previous studies by the Capital District Transportation Committee (CDTC) and the Capital District Transportation Authority (CDTA) indicated limited potential for service in the corridor, both in terms of required capital and O&M costs and insufficient market size. Demand for commuter rail service in the corridor needs to be examined more closely. Census 2000 data show, for example, that only a limited number of workers from Saratoga County travel to work in the City of Albany. There are no economic centers between Saratoga Springs and Plattsburgh, and there is no current market to lend itself to rail passenger travel from Plattsburgh to Glens Falls.

- It was stated that many residents of Saratoga County would like to see rail improvements that enhance service between Saratoga Springs and New York City, rather than improvements focused on tourist travel northbound.

- Commuter rail service could not be implemented with anything less than 3 or 4 round trips per day scheduled such that commuters would be able to complete a full work day. It would also be wise to provide service in both the Saratoga Springs/Schenectady and the Cohoes/Halfmoon/Hudson River travel corridors.
• The potential for transit-oriented development (TOD) in the corridor is limited by the fact that most of the key areas are already developed. The development trends within the region are not conducive to the kind of high-density development that is necessary for TOD.

• While the argument could be made that commuter rail would induce future TOD and other favorable land use choices, can the use of public funds be justified if an acceptable market share cannot be forecast? This is compounded by the social equity issue of the fairness of providing high levels of subsidies for a service geared to white-collar, high-income commuters at the expense of low-income bus riders who are transit captive.

• Within limits, a rail system can make a statement about a region – for instance, that the region is committed to solving long-term traffic problems, providing smart, “green,” mobility solutions, etc. – even though cost-effectiveness is a problem in the near-term.

Even if commuter rail provides only a moderate benefit to existing congestion problems, commuter rail would add to the quality of life in the region. Commuter rail could also have a revitalization effect on communities such as Cohoes, Albany, and Schenectady.

• If commuter rail service were implemented today, how much induced ridership would there be 20 years from now? How can this induced demand be accounted for? The new commuter rail service currently being implemented in the Triangle Region of North Carolina was cited as an example.

• CDTC indicated that as a part of its Long Range Plan update, it has formed a group whose sole charge is to analyze commuter rail programs and policies in other metropolitan areas and determine why areas with demographic profiles less favorable than the Capital District’s have concluded that commuter rail is feasible.

• Marketing rail service in the corridor differently could increase demand – gear it more towards tourism market and less for commuters. Anecdotally, business trips tend to be between New York City and Albany, not between Albany and its surrounding areas or between Albany and Montreal.

• HSR service to Montreal could be difficult to justify – it would be an expensive project that would be built largely through low-density, natural areas like the Adirondack Park.

Existing and Required Infrastructure and Equipment

Infrastructure

• Double tracking, though expensive, would help maintain reliable travel times. At the very least, additional sidings are critical.

• Is it possible to negotiate an agreement with Amtrak under which daily commuters in the Capital District could use existing Amtrak service for a special commuter rate?

Stations
• The “wrong side of the river” issue with Albany-Rensselaer Amtrak station is mainly perception – the station is actually fairly close to main employment areas in downtown Albany.
  
  o A better connection between the Albany-Rensselaer Station and downtown Albany could encourage more development in Rensselaer.
  
  o AGT-type “CyberTran” service connecting the Amtrak station to downtown Albany has been proposed. Shuttle service between the station and several major destinations is another possibility.
  
  o The City of Rensselaer also would like a continuous trail connection to Albany, which could potentially be included as part of a new transit investment between Rensselaer and downtown Albany. The Hudson River Pedestrian Bridge has been very successful.
  
• What would be the station requirements for commuter rail between communities north of Albany and downtown?
  
  o In most heavy rail systems the spacing of commuter stations is less than five miles apart.
  
  o How far north should a new commuter rail system go? Should Saratoga Springs be the northern terminus? Fort Edward?
  
  o A station in downtown Saratoga Springs would be difficult to access. A new station near a highway interchange to the north may work better.
  
  o It is important to consider whether each community along the proposed corridor wants a commuter rail station or not.
  
  o Minimal facilities (e.g., gravel lot, wood platforms) could be constructed as a demonstration project to keep costs down.

Rolling Stock Capital Cost Summary

• One possibility would be to use a combination of new rolling stock and existing equipment from Amtrak’s Ethan Allen service.

• Another possibility would be the use of the turbine trains in 4-car sets. This equipment would not have sufficient capacity to run peak hour between Rensselaer and New York City.

Other Issues and Comments

• The study should consider what would happen if Amtrak ceases to exist.
• Important to consider O&M costs as well as capital costs when making these decisions.

ATTACHMENTS
A. Workshop agenda
B. Sign-in sheets