



**LEFT:** A very dapper Amtrak Conductor, Isiah Sherman, stands by his *Valley Flyer* train at Springfield Union Station, prior to departure northbound as train 400 on a cold Saturday morning, February 23, 2020. *Scott Ornstein*

arrive back at Greenfield at 10:23 p.m. (494), and 12:38 a.m. (478), with connections at New Haven from trains which departed New York City between 5:00 – 6:00 p.m., and again between 7:30 and 8:00 p.m..

Weekend service is on a different schedule, with a mid-morning southbound departure from Greenfield (461) at 9:15 a.m., but then not again until 8:10 p.m. (499). This latter train terminates at Springfield, but connects to a CTrail Hartford Line train for southbound travel.

Northbound weekend service consists of what is basically a positioning equipment move, though still a revenue train (400) departing Springfield at 7:50 a.m., with an 8:58 a.m. arrival in Greenfield, before turning for 461, followed in the evening by 488, a 6:45 p.m. departure from Springfield with a 7:53 PM arrival in Greenfield. Train #488 then turns for 499, the shuttle back to Springfield.

#### Equipment and Fares

The *Valley Flyer* utilizes standard Amtrak equipment, a two-car push-pull train set consisting of a GE P42DC locomotive (for now), an Amfleet coach and an ex-Metroliner coach used as a cab car, or a pull-pull train set with locomotives on either end of the two car train.

Fares charged on the *Valley Flyer* are on the high side but are not totally unreasonable. The lowest one-way fare (Amtrak “Value”) between Greenfield and Springfield is \$18; between Northampton and Springfield \$14, and between Holyoke and Springfield, \$12. Higher “Flexible” fares are also available. Fares to/from destinations beyond the Pioneer Valley are incremental at similar rates.

#### Springfield Union Station

Springfield’s renovated Union Station is an unsung hero in the *Valley Flyer*’s operation. The station reopened in 2017 after decades of neglect and aborted plans for rehabilitation. Six years later though, the facility still retains that “new” sheen. The City of Springfield is rightfully proud of this building, which not only serves Amtrak and CTrail, but also local Pioneer Valley Transit Authority buses, and regional/long distance Peter Pan and Greyhound buses as well. With its adjacent large parking structure, it has become a true inter-modal hub. As in other cities, the redeveloped station is starting to spearhead development in the general station area and elsewhere in the city. Christopher Moskal, now retired, but formerly the Executive Director of the Springfield Redevelopment Authority, hoped in 2020 that the *Valley Flyer* would serve as a springboard for additional service in the future, using Springfield as a base. He said “...Businesses and professional service providers are finding the area around the station as a perfect location for their clients and customer base, with

## Western Massachusetts’ Valley Flyer by Scott Ornstein

**R**ESIDENTS OF THE PIONEER VALLEY region of western Massachusetts now have additional rail travel options available with the *Valley Flyer*, a relatively new service sponsored by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT), and operated under contract by Amtrak. The seeds for this new service were planted when MassDOT completed reconstruction of the “Connecticut River Line” from Springfield, Massachusetts to just south of the Vermont state line in December 2014, enabling Amtrak to re-establish *Vermont* service on the historic route of Amtrak’s *Montrealer* through Northampton, Massachusetts, which had been rerouted in 1987 due to poor track conditions. It was “temporarily” re-routed first via New London and Palmer, and later, as the *Vermont*, via Springfield, Palmer and Amherst, Massachusetts. With the original route back in use, service was terminated at Amherst and restored at Northampton, with additional station stops inaugurated at Holyoke and Greenfield, Massachusetts.

While the MassDOT project set the stage for the *Valley Flyer*, the June, 2018 expansion of train service between New Haven and Hartford, Connecticut, and Springfield, Massachusetts, known as the CTrail Hartford Line, was the key to making *Valley Flyer* service a reality. But the *Valley Flyer* also had an additional champion, a grass-roots group known as Trains In The Valley, which was founded in 2016, and whose mission is “To advocate for improved and expanded passenger and freight rail service in the Pioneer Valley region of western Massachusetts”. Their advocacy for the *Valley Flyer* service aided in its creation and its continued operation. MassDOT paid Amtrak \$1.0 million annually for two years starting August 30, 2019 to operate the *Valley Flyer*, before a determination was to be made in the summer of 2021 on whether to continue its operation.

North America, and indeed much of the world, went into lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic starting in early 2020. Rail service, amongst other

transportation modes, was significantly curtailed, including the *Valley Flyer*, which was reduced to one train in each direction each day. The regular *Valley Flyer* schedule calls for two trains in each direction daily, with a different schedule weekdays and weekends. The service is supplemented by Amtrak’s *Vermont* which operates daily as well, but which was suspended during the heart of the COVID crisis. It wasn’t until July 2021 that the *Valley Flyer* was restored to its original frequency, as was the *Vermont*.

The *Valley Flyer*’s schedule is designed to enable passengers to access Amtrak’s Northeast Corridor services, as well as Metro-North and CTrail’s Shore Line East service, with the key goal of a round trip to New York City and return in one day. That’s a lot of traveling for a day trip, but for those who want or need to do it, the *Valley Flyer* provides this ability. The *Flyer* also provides connections to other cities along the Northeast Corridor.

#### Schedules

The regular weekday schedule calls for southbound departures from Greenfield, Massachusetts, on weekdays at 5:45 a.m. (Amtrak train 495) and 7:35 a.m. (471), with connections in New Haven to trains having late morning/early afternoon arrivals in New York. Northbound, *Valley Flyer* trains



**RIGHT:** Amtrak train 461, the *Valley Flyer*, boards passengers at Greenfield, Massachusetts, on February 23, 2020. *Scott Ornstein*



**RIGHT:** The Northampton, Massachusetts, station platform is adjacent to the original Northampton Union Station which dates back to 1897. This photo was taken February 22, 2020. *Scott Ornstein*

**BELOW:** Yellow highlight illustrates the route of the *Valley Flyer* between Greenfield and Springfield, Massachusetts and southward to New Haven, Connecticut.



easy access from all parts of the Pioneer Valley and northern Connecticut”.

#### All Aboard!

Taking a casual round trip ride on the *Valley Flyer* is somewhat difficult given its current schedule, but then again, the service is not designed for this purpose. However, it can be done if you find yourself in Springfield, Massachusetts on a weekend day and don't mind getting up early in the morning. I did this several times in 2020 and again in early 2023, riding train 400 to Greenfield, with a quick return back to Springfield on 461. Departing Springfield after being greeted by the very friendly crews, particularly on one trip with Amtrak Conductor Isiah Sherman, probably one of the best dressed Amtrak conductors I've seen in a long time. His Amtrak logoed bow tie added a touch of class on a cold February, 2020 morning in Springfield.

Departing Union Station, the *Valley Flyer* first makes a time-consuming back-up move south to the Memorial Avenue Bridge, “CP Sweeney”, due to the lack of an interlocking to enable most of the Springfield platform tracks to access the north leg of the wye located just to the west of the station. Hence, the south leg must be used.

Once headed northbound from Springfield, the *Valley Flyer* crosses the diamond over CSX's main line between Boston and points west (the former “Boston & Albany”). The Connecticut River Line then threads its way north between its eponymous river and Interstates 91, then 391. To the north of Springfield lies Chicopee, where the tracks head west over the Connecticut River, crossing into the old industrial city of Holyoke, once known for its paper products industry. A new 400-foot-long concrete platform handles *Valley Flyer* trains.

Continuing north, the tracks follow the Connecticut River shoreline before turning west, away from the river, through Easthampton to reach Northampton, which is home to Smith College, one of the “Five Colleges” in the region. Northampton is also the historic Hampshire County seat. The

other colleges in the area include the University of Massachusetts, Amherst College and Hampshire College, all in Amherst, and Mount Holyoke College in nearby South Hadley.

The Northampton station is right downtown and consists of a 146-foot-long, high-level timber platform. It is adjacent to the 1897 vintage Northampton Union Station which, following restoration, served as a restaurant for many years, and now serves primarily as a banquet facility, though two bars are also located in the building facility.

Leaving Northampton, rural farmlands and heavily wooded areas of the Pioneer Valley are visible as the tracks pass through the towns of Hatfield and Whately, as well as the town of Deerfield, which aside from its historic village, is home to Mount Sugarloaf, whose observation deck provides a spectacular view of the Connecticut River and the Pioneer Valley. The road to the summit of Mount Sugarloaf is only open between mid-May and mid-October. As is happening in many places, there are signs of development, with light industrial areas springing up along the *Valley Flyer* route, on what until fairly recently was still farmland.

At the north end of Deerfield the tracks cross a high bridge over the Deerfield River and into Greenfield, where a 146-foot-long, high-level timber platform is located adjacent to the John W. Olver Transportation Center, a hub for the Greenfield area's local buses. The track continues north to Brattleboro, Vermont and beyond, but Greenfield is as far north as the *Valley Flyer* goes for now.

MassDOT's investment in right-of-way and track improvements between Springfield and Greenfield (and farther north to near the Vermont border) in 2014 has paid off with a very smooth and pleasant ride. Track speeds range from 50 MPH on the Springfield-to-Chicopee segment, 60 MPH between Holyoke and Northampton, and 79 MPH for most of the remaining distance between Northampton and Greenfield.

#### Ridership

Specific ridership numbers are difficult to determine, as figures for the *Valley Flyer* and *Vermont* are combined when reported. However, my observations show that *Valley Flyer* ridership is higher than it was back in 2020. More important, when I first rode the *Valley Flyer* back then, there were just a few riders on the trains I rode, though the service was still fairly new at that point. However, there was a tentativeness that I noticed back then, as I could overhear people saying they were unsure how good the service would be, and made comments about how maybe they should have driven to their destinations, etc. In contrast, when I rode it again in January, 2023, the ridership seemed much different. Aside from there being



**LEFT:** The Northampton, Massachusetts, station platform is shown February 22, 2020. *Scott Ornstein*





**LEFT:** Entrance to The Northampton, Massachusetts, station platform, February 22, 2020. *Scott Ornstein*



**BELOW LEFT:** The Holyoke platform as seen on February 23, 2020. *Scott Ornstein*

**BOTTOM LEFT:** Amtrak train 461 is about to blow by the Keets Road crossing in South Deerfield, Massachusetts, February 12, 2023. *Doug Manson*

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** Most of the 400-foot-long platform at Holyoke is seen in this view February 23, 2020. *Scott Ornstein*

(CRISI) funds, with a 50% match from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, for preliminary engineering design and environmental clearance work for track, signal and infrastructure improvements in and around Springfield Union Station. The design is expected to call for the construction of additional rebuilt platforms, crossover tracks, storage tracks and a new layover facility. Currently, only Platform C, hosting Tracks 4 and 6, is fully ADA accessible. Track 8 is a low level platform accessed from Platform D, and is elevator accessible. Tracks 2 and 2a on Platform B are accessed from Platform C. Platform A is for Track 1, and primarily handles the Boston-Albany/Rensselaer section of the *Lake Shore Limited*. *Valley Flyer* trains can currently be dispatched from all but Track 1 at Springfield. Although these infrastructure improvements are for services at Springfield, including the Hartford Line (to New Haven) and the *Valley Flyer*, CSX's Boston-Albany freight service will also benefit, as will MassDOT's planned "east-west" rail service between Springfield and Boston.

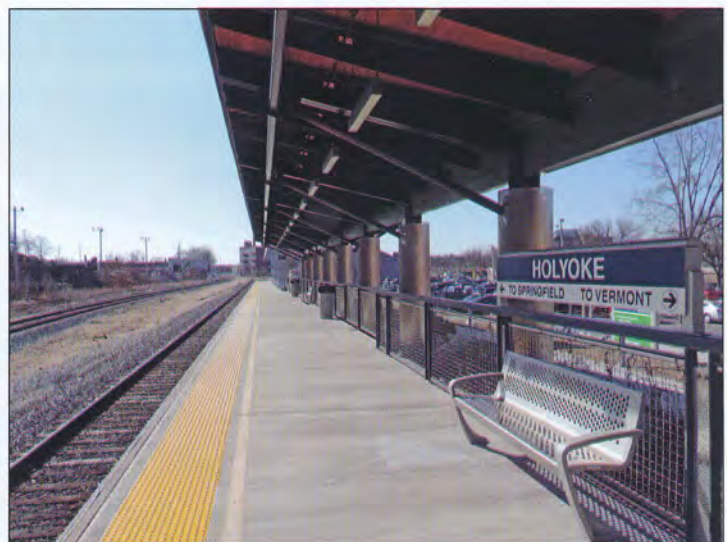
Although most of the hard work is done, looking ahead, Ben Heckscher, co-founder of Trains In The Valley, would like to see some tweaks to the service. In general terms, better integration with Hartford Line service would help in making New Haven-Springfield-Greenfield all one corridor, as opposed to the trains north of Springfield appearing to be a separate service.

Heckscher also agrees that the fare structure could use some attention too. He points out that "it costs about three times as much to travel from Holyoke to New Haven (on the *Valley Flyer*) as it does to travel from Springfield to New Haven, on the same train — and to riders this doesn't make much sense. In terms of the service schedule, he noted that "The second northbound train to Greenfield arrives well after midnight, which just doesn't work for most people. Our preference would be to move this train to a time that would allow people to arrive between 6 and 7 p.m."

more travelers, there was none of the tentativeness that I had noticed previously. A good number of passengers boarding my trains seemed experienced, carried suitcases and were clearly making overnight trips. Overhearing discussions between crew members and passengers confirmed that some were travelling to places off the Hartford Line, including New York, Philadelphia and other points on the Northeast Corridor. This is exactly what had been hoped for when the *Valley Flyer* was developed.

#### The Future

The future is now looking good for the *Valley Flyer*. In October 2022 MassDOT announced that the service would become permanent. This is a tribute to all those who advocated for, and supported the service during its development and first years of operation. This announcement was preceded in September by news that Massachusetts had been awarded \$1.75 million in Federal Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements





These kinds of changes will require concurrence of Amtrak, MassDOT and CTDOT, and will be dependent on equipment and crew availability.

Back in the early 1980s, when I attended the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the Pioneer Valley region seemed worlds away from my hometown of New Rochelle, New York and the greater New York City area. In reality, by car it was just a three hour, 142-mile trip, or a four-hour trip on a combination of trains and buses. Although the *Valley Flyer* would not have helped me in my travels back then, its existence today helps make that world just a little bit smaller.



**ABOVE:** Amtrak 461 (at right) has just arrived from Greenfield, Massachusetts and is awaiting its departure to New Haven, Connecticut on Track 6 at Springfield, January 28, 2023. Another Amtrak Springfield-New Haven shuttle trainset awaits its next assignment on Track 4. *Scott OrNSTein*

**RIGHT:** Springfield Union Station reopened in 2017 after an extensive renovation which is shown in this January 25, 2020 view. The station is an unsung hero in the success of the *Valley Flyer*. *Scott OrNSTein*

**BOTTOM LEFT:** The departure board at Springfield Union Station shows departures for Amtrak #400, the northbound *Valley Flyer* to Greenfield, as well as train 461, the turn from Greenfield, Massachusetts en route to New Haven, Connecticut, on February 25, 2020. *Scott OrNSTein*

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** It's not every day, or just anywhere, that you can see two former Metroliner cab control cars sharing a platform in 2023. You can, for now, in Springfield, Massachusetts, although as Amtrak begins its fleet renewal, that is bound to change. (Hint: start getting your photos now). *Scott OrNSTein*



### Amtrak Valley Flyer and Vermonter Timetable

including connections with Metro-North Railroad / New Haven Line service



Normal Days of Operation		Monday – Friday			Weekends	
SOUTHBOUND		Valley Flyer 495	Valley Flyer 471	Vermonter 55	Valley Flyer 461	Vermonter 57
To: New Haven & New York						
GREENFIELD	8:45A	7:35A	1:40P	9:15A	1:30P	
Northampton	6:15A	8:05A	2:05P	8:55A	2:01P	
Holyoke	6:25A	8:15A	2:20P	9:05A	2:15P	
SPRINGFIELD	6:53A	8:43A	2:30P	10:23A	2:30P	
Windsor Locks	7:05A	8:55A	2:54P	10:35A	2:50P	
		9:14A	3:16P	10:53A	3:12P	
Connecting bus:		CTtransit 24	CTtransit 24	CTtransit 24		
Windsor Locks dp	7:30A	9:20A	3:20P			
Bradley Airport, Terminal A ar	7:45A	9:35A	3:30P			
Windsor	7:28A	9:18A		10:58A		
HARTFORD	7:38A	9:28A	3:31P	11:08A	3:27P	
Berlin	7:48A	9:38A		11:18A		
Meriden	7:58A	9:48A	3:53P	11:28A	3:48P	
Wallingford	8:06A	9:57A		11:36A		
New Haven – State Street	8:19A	10:10A		11:48A		
NEW HAVEN – Union Station ar	8:27A	10:18A	4:19P	11:56A	4:14P	

To: Greenfield	Vermonter thru train	Valley Flyer 494	Valley Flyer 478	Vermonter thru train	Valley Flyer 488
NEW HAVEN – Union Station dp	1:30P	7:35P	9:55P	1:30P	5:00P
New Haven – State Street		7:37P	9:57P		5:02P
Wallingford		7:49P	10:09P		5:14P
Meriden	1:50P	7:58P	10:18P	1:50P	5:23P
Berlin		8:07P	10:28P		5:32P
HARTFORD	2:11P	8:28P	10:48P	2:11P	5:40P
Windsor		8:27P	10:47P		5:53P
Connecting bus:		CTtransit 24	CTtransit 24	CTtransit 24	
Bradley Airport, Terminal A dp	1:55P	8:05P	10:25P		
Windsor Locks ar	2:13P	8:23P	10:43P		
Windsor Locks dp	2:22P	8:34P	10:53P	2:22P	5:59P
SPRINGFIELD	2:48P	8:58P	11:18P	2:55P	6:24P
Holyoke	3:15P	9:15P	11:30P	3:15P	6:45P
Northampton	3:41P	9:41P	11:56P	3:41P	7:11P
GREENFIELD	4:22P	10:23P	12:12A	4:22P	7:27P
			12:38A		7:53P