

The Future of Western Mass Rail: From Grassroots Advocacy to Reality

Description: Advocates for the Valley Flyer, East-West Rail, and the Northern Tier will discuss their work to expand and improve passenger rail service in western Massachusetts, highlighting coalition-building and other effective advocacy strategies. The panel will examine opportunities to strengthen connections east to Boston, south to New York City, and west to Albany; and to expand service north to Montreal.

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Moderator: Rep. Lindsay Sabadosa is the State Representative from First Hampshire District and represents the towns of Chesterfield, Cummington, Goshen, Hatfield, Plainfield, Westhampton, Williamsburg, Worthington, and the city of Northampton. She is a member of the Joint Committee on Transportation and the House Committee on Ways and Means.

PANELISTS

Ben Heckscher is a co-founder of Trains In The Valley, a rail advocacy organization he launched with Zane Lumelsky in 2016. Since its founding, the group has become a leading advocate for expanded and improved passenger rail service in the Pioneer Valley, producing a widely read website and newsletter covering rail service, transportation policy, and future plans across the region. Ben is an electrical engineer by training and grew up outside Philadelphia. He lives in Hatfield with his wife, Julie, a Northampton native.

Ben Hood is a co-founder of Citizens for a Palmer Rail Stop and the Western Mass Rail Coalition. He has served as a member and chairperson of the Palmer Rail Steering Committee, and as a member of the municipal stakeholders' steering committee formed to advise MassDOT as it developed the conceptual design for a Palmer passenger rail station. Ben serves as the Town of Palmer's designee on the PVTa Advisory Board.

Anne Miller is a co-founder of Citizens for a Palmer Rail Stop and the Western Mass Rail Coalition. She has been a member of WMTAN since its inception in 2019 and was a recipient of Harvard's 2012 Green Carpet Award.

Brian Forgue is the current Chair of the Chester Selectboard, and has also served as the Chair of Chester's Finance Committee, as a member of the Gateway Regional School Committee, and as Chester's Town Moderator. He has been a resident of the Town of Chester for 20 years, and firmly believes in the benefits of West-East Rail to the Hilltowns and Western MA more broadly.

Robert Daley is a civic leader in Chester, currently serving on the local Planning Board, Finance Committee, and as a Water Commissioner. He also represents his town regionally as a member of the Western Mass Rail Coalition and an alternate PVPC Commissioner. His past roles include Gateway Regional School District School Committee, the Chester Railway Station board of trustees, and various town advisory boards.

Richard Holzman, Ed.D. is a civic leader in Chester, currently serving as a Planning Board member, PVPC Commissioner, and a member of the Western Mass Rail Coalition. His background in municipal governance includes past roles as a town Selectman and Town Moderator. Additionally, Dr. Holzman has contributed to regional education and preservation as a former Superintendent of Schools and a Trustee for the historic Chester Railway Station.

Moe Rusly is a student at Williams College studying mathematics and environmental studies, where he serves as a Civic Innovation Fellow at the Center for Learning in Action. He leads student trips and advocacy at Williams for the Link413 regional bus service, promoting better transit connections across the Berkshires. He is also involved in advocacy efforts to restore passenger rail service on the Northern Tier Rail corridor, reconnecting the northern Berkshires to Greenfield and Boston.

Senator Jo Comerford has been the State Senator for the Hampshire, Franklin, and Worcester district since 2019. Prior to joining the legislature, Jo spent decades as a community organizer with organizations such as AFSC, MoveOn, the National Priorities Project, and the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts. Since day one of her first term in the Senate, Jo has been laser focused on efforts to restore passenger rail service on the Northern Tier Corridor in central/western Massachusetts. Her bill to launch an exploratory commission that has since returned a robust report was the first bill Jo passed in the Massachusetts Legislature.