



APRIL DIALOGUES SUMMARY

With the release of the Preliminary Alternatives Report in early April, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) held a series of informal workshops to maintain an ongoing dialogue with the public. The workshops, called April Dialogues, were held in each of the three program regions:

- Northern Region: Monday, April 8, 2013, 5:00 to 7:00 PM, New Haven, CT
- Central Region: Tuesday, April 9, 2013, 5:00 to 7:00 PM, Newark, NJ
- Southern Region: Wednesday, April 10, 2013, 5:00 to 7:00 PM, Washington, D.C.

The Dialogues served as both listening and information sharing sessions to provide an update on the program status, development of alternatives for the Northeast Corridor, and next steps in evaluating the alternatives, as well as to gather feedback from participants during interactive breakout sessions. In addition to the three in-person workshops, a public webcast was held on April 18, 2013.

The April Dialogues were open to all interested persons. They were publicized with e-mail blasts to the NEC FUTURE e-mail contact list and through FRA's social media. Participants were asked to pre-register for the in-person workshops to ensure sufficient space and materials would be available. A total of 193 persons attended the sessions as follows:

- New Haven – 62
- Newark – 44
- Washington, D.C. – 30
- Webcast – 57

This summary provides a general overview of the three workshops and the webcast.



Participants in New Haven listen to an update on the NEC FUTURE program.

Each Dialogue began with a 30-minute presentation. Rebecca Reyes-Alicea, FRA Program Manager for NEC FUTURE, provided an overview of the study goals and objectives, key components, stakeholder input, and schedule. Next, a member of the NEC FUTURE project team provided an update on the alternatives development process. This included the components that comprise the alternatives: markets, service options, and Program Levels; the 15 Preliminary Alternatives, and screening criteria that will be used to further evaluate the Preliminary Alternatives into a shorter list of Reasonable Alternatives. A quick overview was then provided of the exercises for the breakout group discussion. (The webcast did not include the breakout group exercises.)

At each workshop, attendees were assigned to breakout groups of approximately 5-8 participants. Facilitators led each group through two exercises to allow participants to provide feedback on the Preliminary Alternatives and the criteria for evaluating them. A summary of the exercises and feedback provided is presented below.

Exercise 1 – Preliminary Alternatives

After introductions by the participants in the breakout group and an overview of ground rules, facilitators reviewed the information on the three components of the alternatives: service options, Program Levels, and route options. The routes connect key travel markets, and the Program Levels vary from modest capital investment and service options to dedicated high speed rail and robust regional service. At each level, the alternatives present different service options, including new types of service to increase frequency, minimize travel time, or increase the number of one-seat rides. The groups were asked to review each of these three components in turn and answer questions as described below. The groups were not asked to take votes during Exercise 1, but those participants who had a specific preference among the options were asked to indicate that preference and the reason for it.

Service Options

Facilitators reviewed the information on service options and described the trade-offs associated with these options. For example, increasing the frequency of trains could limit opportunities for higher speed service. Facilitators asked participants two questions:

- Does anyone have any questions about the difference between these service options?
- Which of these service options would you say is most important to you, and why?

Conventional

- Maintain the mix of services offered on the NEC today, including commuter / regional trains, intercity service, and high-speed
- Each of these service types would increase in proportion to market demand

Faster

- Minimize travel time for key intercity travel markets
- Express service with limited stops on improved or new rail right-of-way
- Convenient, well-coordinated transfers at express hub stations
- Less frequent non-express service

More Frequent

- Maximize service frequency
- Maximize NEC passenger-carrying capacity
- Convenient, well-coordinated transfers at hub stations
- May limit opportunities for higher speed service and one-seat ride service from connecting corridors

More One-Seat Rides

- Maximize one-seat rides on and off NEC spine
- Run-through service from connecting corridors
- More choices of direct service to various destinations
- Each individual train service would be less frequent

Some groups indicated a strong preference for one service option over another, while others commented on the benefits a service option would provide, without actually choosing a favorite. For the Dialogues overall, frequency of service emerged as the preferred service option, with faster service a second choice. Frequency was perceived as more important than speed across most groups at the New Haven and Washington, D.C. workshops, while faster service was noted as a higher priority for most of the groups in Newark. In contrast, there was little interest in the service option emphasizing one-seat rides. Many participants expressed a willingness to transfer between local and express services if convenient cross-platform transfers can be provided. At the Newark workshop, one group indicated that one-seat rides are needed in key markets. Other overall comments included the following:

- At each workshop, participants stressed the importance of connectivity between rail services and between rail and other modes
- Several participants felt that quality of service is more important than specific service options. Elements of quality mentioned included reliability, passenger comfort, convenience, and Wi-Fi service (enabling productive business use of on-board time). Others would rather see lower fares for conventional service than enhanced forms of service
- One group noted that the ideal service would combine aspects of the distinct service options presented in the exercise

The following comments were specific to the New Haven Dialogue:

- One participant noted that the lack of convenient air service is a barrier to locating a business in Connecticut. If faster rail connections could be provided to Logan Airport or the New York area airports, it could help to spur economic development in New Haven and the surrounding region
- Existing schedules make it difficult to use rail for certain trips, such as Boston to New York for early morning meetings
- Several participants would support whichever service option would help shift travel from single occupant vehicle use to the train, reducing vehicle-miles traveled (VMT)
- Participants noted that potential “game-changers” for long-term service planning include the future of the airline industry, climate change and coastal resilience, and potential breakthroughs in communications technology. Consideration should be given to how we will use trains in the future, and what that means for economic development

The following comments were specific to the Newark Dialogue:

- Both frequency and speed are need to make rail service more competitive with air and vehicular travel
- The need for faster services relates to the economy: since the economy is moving faster, there is a need to get to places more quickly
- One-seat rides are needed in key markets. For example, participants suggested having direct connections between New Jersey and Grand Central Terminal and between Harrisburg and Washington, D.C.
- Service options are focused on new service, but it is important to provide improvements that will benefit existing users, such as new rolling stock
- Regularity and reliability of service are critical. Some participants would like the convenience of clock-face schedules
- Participants noted other amenities that are important, such as Wi-Fi and compatibility with MTA NYCT MetroCard or EZPass

The following comments were specific to the Washington, D.C. Dialogue:

- All service options should preserve commuter rail connectivity
- Capacity is most important to improve the corridor, as more capacity allows flexibility in scheduling seasonal and special events, etc.
- One-seat rides are less important than frequency and speed, however it is important to reduce the time spent waiting for transfers

Program Levels

The next part of Exercise 1 focused on the Program Levels, which represent a wide range of potential investment scenarios, from relatively modest investments to high-end investment that includes creating a second NEC Spine. Facilitators reviewed the Program Levels and asked participants two questions:

- Do you have any questions about the differences among the four Program Levels?
- Without regard to cost, which of these Program Levels do you feel represents the best direction for the NEC through 2040?

Program Level: A (Low)

- Allows for modest increases in service along the existing spine
- Addresses the worst choke points along the corridor

Program Level: B (Medium Low)

- Allows service expansions in all markets on the existing spine
- Provides additional capacity for some new types of express and regional service
- Improves off-corridor connections

Program Level: C (Medium High)

- Major increase in service to all markets on the existing spine
- Targeted investments to serve new markets and provide robust regional service
- Significantly expands service to connecting corridors
- Reduces trip times

Program Level: D (High)

- Supports a major increase in the amount, quality, and variety of services offered on the NEC
- Adds a second spine between Washington D.C. and Boston, allowing for high-speed rail connections and robust regional services

As with the service options, some breakout groups indicated a strong preference for one Program Level over another, while others did not choose a favorite. For the April Dialogues overall, of those groups that arrived at a preference, most preferred either Program Levels C or D, with some support for a “B/C” range. No groups in any location preferred Program Level A as an end state. However, many expressed support for an incremental “fix it first” approach that would start with the Program Level A improvements. Several participants felt that more information on factors such as travel time savings and cost differences would be needed to choose a Program Level.



Participants in Newark discuss service options for the Preliminary Alternatives.

- In New Haven, Program Level C was the most preferred Program Level overall. Program Level C was seen as providing for targeted investment while thinking boldly for the future. There was also some support for Program Level D; however, it was recognized that this would be politically difficult to achieve. One group felt that the flexibility to expand to Program Level D was important. Another thought that affordability to the consumer should be a factor in choosing a Program Level.
- Newark participants expressed support for Program Levels C and D. Many felt that Program Level D would best serve the needs of the NEC, while others felt that improvements should be made in phases, through Program Level C first, while reserving right-of-way for a future second spine. One participant noted that Program Level A, while not optimal, would still provide a “solid world-class railroad.” Another proposed blending Program Levels with different levels/headways for different sections of the corridor.
- In Washington, D.C., there was support for Program Levels B, C and D. Some participants felt Program Level C is more realistic, and still allows for significant market expansion. Others supported Program Level D, with one reason being the redundancy it provides. However, many had concerns about the environmental impacts of Program Level D.

Route Options

Exercise 1 finished with consideration of the representative routes identified in the Preliminary Alternatives. Facilitators provided maps of the Preliminary Alternatives (presented on the following page). The first map, for Preliminary Alternatives 1 through 10, showed the existing spine where improvements would be focused in these alternatives. The second map, for Preliminary Alternative 11, also showed the existing spine and included potential connecting services that could more readily be provided in that alternative. The remaining four maps showed the routes for Preliminary Alternatives 12 through 15, which involve the construction of a second spine as follows:

- Preliminary Alternative 12 provides a second spine parallel to the existing NEC
- Preliminary Alternative 13 provides a second spine via Danbury-Hartford-Providence
- Preliminary Alternative 14 provides a second spine via Suffolk-Hartford-Worcester
- Preliminary Alternative 15 provides a second spine via Delmarva and Nassau-Stamford-Danbury-Springfield

Facilitators asked participants the following questions:

- Do you have any initial reactions to these routes?
- Do any of these routes raise concerns for you?
- Do you have any other comments or questions about the routes?

In all three workshops, most groups favored one or more of the second spine alternatives (Preliminary Alternatives 12 through 15), with many saying that Preliminary Alternatives 1 through 11 did not provide enough additional service or capacity. However, the groups had divergent views on which of the Program Level D alternatives was preferable, with the groups favoring different routes and many groups unable to agree on a common preference.

Overall, many participants expressed concerns about the environmental impacts of the greenfield portions of Preliminary Alternatives 13, 14 and 15. In particular, many expressed skepticism about the Delmarva portion of Preliminary Alternative 15, both for environmental reasons as well as a perception that an Annapolis route would not be viable from a market perspective.

Participants expressed differing opinions on the idea of a Long Island route, with some strongly supporting it while others felt it was not a viable choice for political or environmental reasons. Others chose a preferred route among the Program Level D Preliminary Alternatives based on whether or not it included New Haven or Providence.

Route for Preliminary Alternatives 1 through 10



Route for Preliminary Alternative 13



Route for Preliminary Alternative 11



Route for Preliminary Alternative 14



Route for Preliminary Alternative 12



Route for Preliminary Alternative 15



In New Haven, some participants preferred an inland route, in part due to concerns about how climate change and sea level rise could affect the Connecticut shore route. Preliminary Alternative 12, with double track along the Connecticut coast, was seen as difficult to construct, but it received support in one group. Other feedback from the New Haven session included the following:

- Improvements to the existing spine are seen as a top priority
- There was some support for Preliminary Alternative 14, since it would connect economic activity centers
- Preliminary Alternative 15 is not preferred, as it bypasses New Haven and Baltimore
- The greenfield routes may tend to promote development in places without necessary infrastructure. One participant thought high-speed rail might counteract efforts to revitalize Connecticut urban centers. Another thought that building a Long Island tunnel would tend to create sprawl.
- The existing New Haven alignment provides the potential to improve access via Metro-North Railroad branches
- Freight consideration with connectivity to ports should be looked at for all route options
- Some participants would like to see airports as major hubs, with stops at Bradley International Airport and T.F. Green Airport
- Assumptions made about ticket fares will have a large impact on the potential ridership for the various alternatives

In Newark, there were divergent opinions about the viability of a Long Island route. Some groups favored the idea and others strongly opposed it. One participant noted that there is considerable transit-oriented development taking place on Long Island, which could enhance the potential for new rail services. Other feedback in Newark included the following:

- Two potential modifications to Preliminary Alternative 14 emerged in the Newark discussions. One group proposed the addition of Springfield to the route. Another participant proposed that the route be extended through eastern Long Island and connect to New London
- Some participants had concerns about the downtown Philadelphia routing included in Preliminary Alternatives 8 through 15, due to the tunneling that would be involved
- One group suggested improving service “from Vermont to Virginia”, using a variety of train sets to eliminate layovers and increase frequency



Participants in Newark discuss the Preliminary Alternative routes.



Participants in Washington, D.C. discuss the Preliminary Alternative routes.

In Washington, D.C., many groups supported the idea of a Long Island route, though not necessarily in the form presented in the Preliminary Alternatives. One stated that a “Long Island to Connecticut connection is long overdue.” Other points raised in Washington, D.C. included the following:

- There were many concerns about the Delmarva portion of Preliminary Alternative 15, both for environmental reasons and because it would omit Baltimore from the second spine. One group preferred Preliminary Alternative 12 because it would avoid impacts to new areas
- Several participants stressed the importance of rail connections to Hampton Roads, VA. They would like to see the Richmond urban crescent clearly identified on mapping for NEC FUTURE

The table below summarizes the feedback received on the routes for the April Dialogues as a whole.

PRELIMINARY ALTERNATIVE	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
1 - 11	Incremental benefits	Not enough additional service or capacity
12	High speed service	Difficult to construct Coastal vulnerability
13	High speed service Avoids coastal areas	Environmental impacts of greenfield portions Bypasses New Haven
14	High speed service Service to Long Island Connects economic activity centers	Environmental impacts of greenfield portions Bypasses Providence Long Island route not viable
15	High speed service Service to Long Island	Environmental impacts of greenfield portions Delmarva route not viable from market or environmental perspective Bypasses New Haven, Baltimore and Providence Long Island route not viable Too many stops in Connecticut

Exercise 2 – Screening Criteria

For this exercise, facilitators reviewed the preliminary screening criteria for evaluating the 15 Preliminary Alternatives. These include:

- Ridership
- Cost
- Service Effectiveness
- Environmental Benefits and Impacts
- Economic Development and Sustainability
- System Connectivity
- Rail Freight Service Capacity
- Service to Markets Off Existing Spine
- Flexibility, Redundancy, and Resilience
- Constructability and Phasing

Facilitators asked participants the following questions:

- Do you have any comments on the list of criteria? Does it seem comprehensive? Are there other criteria that should be considered?
- Which criteria are most important to you and why? (Each participant was given three dots to indicate their preference.)

The most favored criteria across all groups were ridership (64), economic development and sustainability (47), cost (45) and service effectiveness (43). In New Haven, the most preferred criterion was economic development/sustainability, while for the other two locations it was ridership. A summary of the preferences for all criteria is presented in the table below.

CRITERIA	PREFERENCES			
	NEW HAVEN	NEWARK	WASHINGTON, D.C.	TOTAL
Ridership	23	25	16	64
Cost	15	17	13	45
Service effectiveness	15	15	13	43
Environmental Benefits and Impacts	11	1	3	15
Economic Development and Sustainability	28	9	10	47
System Connectivity	17	7	12	36
Rail Freight Service Capacity	2	4	6	12
Service to Markets Off Existing Spine	7	6	4	17
Flexibility, Redundancy, and Resiliency, Reliability	17	8	9	34
Constructability and Phasing	5	11	4	20



Participants in Newark note their preferred screening criteria.

Some groups proposed additional criteria. These criteria are listed below.

- Convenience to User
- Coordination & Scheduling
- Cost Effectiveness
- Cost to the Consumer
- Preservation and Improvements to the Existing Corridor
- Operational Effectiveness
- Impact on Commuter Rail Service
- Ability to Privatize
- Political Feasibility

Discussion

After the two breakout group exercises, participants reconvened for a report from each group. This was followed by a brief presentation on next steps, which include reviewing the Preliminary Alternatives with stakeholders and public, developing the screening methodology to guide evaluation, evaluating Preliminary Alternatives, developing Reasonable Alternatives, and preparing for the environmental impact analysis of Reasonable Alternatives. The workshops concluded with a time for questions and answers. The following question topics were raised.

- Alternatives:
 - The number of Reasonable Alternatives to be studied in the EIS
 - Whether any new alternatives will be added
- Study area:
 - Whether consideration will be given to lengthening the corridor beyond Washington, D.C.
- Off-corridor connections:
 - The potential for direct connections to New Hampshire, Maine and Vermont via Boston in any of the alternatives
 - How the implications of each alternative for one-seat routes to off-corridor destinations will be analyzed
- Access modes:
 - Whether new bus routes will be considered that make accessing the spine easier
 - Whether support for local light rail/feeder services is included in the program
- Fares:
 - Whether different pricing points will be considered for different types of users
- Study methodology:
 - How the study methodology compares with similar studies done elsewhere in the world, and whether a peer review process is being used
 - How ridership data will be used to develop and evaluate the alternatives
 - How the reasonableness of the Reasonable Alternatives will be determined
- Funding:
 - Projected sources of funding
- Private sector opportunities:
 - Potential for involvement of the private investment community in funding improvements
 - Potential for private sector operations
- Public information:
 - Whether meeting summaries will be posted online
 - What additional information and reports can be made available beyond what is currently on the website
- National significance:
 - Whether national impacts (such as economic impacts) will be considered and whether national public outreach will be done

After these discussions, FRA and the NEC FUTURE project team identified next steps and the time frame for subsequent outreach efforts and the workshops concluded.