



PUBLIC MEETING

October 27, 2022
MINUTES

The Lewis and Clark County Commissioners Public Meeting was held on Thursday, October 27, 2022, at 9:00 AM in Commission Chambers, Room 330.

Roll Call

Chair Jim McCormick called the meeting to order at 9 a.m.

Commissioner Tom Rolfe and Commissioner Andy Hunthausen were present. Others attending all or a portion of the meeting included Roger Baltz, Nicho Hash, Marni Bentley, John Herrin, Martin Baumann, Paul Pacini, Valerie Floccare, Freda Williamson, Joe Steffens, Savanna Barrett, Amy Barrett, Arnie Gidlow, Becky Piske, Neil Harrington, Marianne Shomaker, Paul Jacquay, Emily Auld, MaryAnn Dunwell, Linda Beischell, Joanne Gores, Susan DeBree, Elizabeth Kohlsteadt, Amy Budke, Gregory Thomas, Jane Ogle, Kathryn Driscoll, Bob Goodwyn, Joanne Hores, Norane Freightadt, Linda Gryczan, Sandy Shull, Lee Shubert, and Brandi Spangler, Recording Secretary.

Pledge of Allegiance

Everyone recited the pledge.

Consent Action Items

- a. Vendor Claims Report for Week Ending October 28, 2022. (Marni Bentley)

Roger Baltz, Chief Administrative Officer, reported on consent action item 2a and recommended approval.

No public comment was received.

A motion to Approve was made by Commissioner Rolfe and seconded by Commissioner Hunthausen. The motion Passed on a 3-0 vote.

Public comment on any public matter within the jurisdiction of the Commission that is not on the agenda above.

Gregory Thomas, Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority Representative and member of the Sleeping Giant affiliate of the Northern Resource Plains Council, highlighted there are no state or local taxes supporting long distance rail services provided by Amtrak in the United States nor has there ever been, nor will there ever be. It is paid for by ticket sales revenue, and renewable federal grants.

Hugh Zacheim, Sleeping Giant Citizens Council, is in favor of the rail service as it contributes to the health and well being of citizens in the state and creates opportunity. Invitations to participate were sent to 24 counties, of them 19 counties are in support and have appointed a county representative to sit on the Board of Directors. A public forum was presented in January 2022 to educate residents. The Council seeks closure. There was a petition of support that will be shared once the Commission's concerns are addressed. Formal proposal was postponed twice and a request for a meeting in September went unanswered. The desire of the council is to address concerns and to perceive obstacles.

Savanna Barret, resident, stated that through interviews they learned that the Commission's concern was about procedure of withdrawing from the Authority, taxing the community, and that tax assessment would be decided by the Authority and not county by county. The 2017 legislature denied a bill that was brought forth to them. There were two resolutions that were made to address the issues brought by the Commission. Amtrak is providing, not selling, passenger rail transportation nationwide. Communities in North Montana pay nothing to support the passenger rail that run through those communities.

Paul Picini, resident, supports the rail service. Rail Authority, Montana Rail Service and Santa Fe answered a few questions about increased taxes. The questions were whether a government entity can expect to experience a local tax assessment to pay for passenger rail services, how long has the 750-mile guidelines been in place, and what are the chances of reduction in years to come. They answered that federal grants play a critical role in covering Amtrak's costs including route costs not covered by other revenue sources such as ticket revenue. State and local government have not provided funding for operating costs and there is no statutory requirement for them to do so. Amtrak Government Affairs is open to speaking with the Commissioners. The 750-mile framework considered long distance was put in place by Congress in 2008 as part of the passenger rail investment improvement act. It was not intended to limit support of long-distance routes. Required support for long distance routes as part of a bipartisan bill last year added provisions clarifying and strengthening Amtraks support. Congress recognizes the importance of long-distance routes, especially ones that connect rural to the national transportation system. Amtrak stated there is no legal requirement for counties involved to increase taxes. Budgets will need to be adjusted to account for new long-distance routes. Local government will not fund the long-distance rail. We only need to look at the example of Empire Builder in Montana to see how it plays out. The example used is that of the federal government asking property taxes to fund I-15 or I-90 highways. The citizens acknowledge there will be local costs to train stations and they see it as an investment into the community. As citizens, they are willing to support those efforts. All questions have been addressed. A copy of the petition from January was provided.

Bob Jones, 1039 N. Warren Street, is in support of the Commission to support the resolution. The passenger rail is not a risky investment. There are obvious costs that are not covered by the rail funding and that is acknowledged. There is already a need to maintain the facilities that are already in the community. The passenger rail calls attention to the housing in Helena. Passenger rail only make these investments less risky by enhancing the area. Maybe community housing could be built near the rail. Federal funds are available, and the citizens may want to be taxed for this effort. It could be important for community growth and development.

Becky Piske, resident, would love to see an alternate way to move around the country besides airplanes. Her mother lives in Spokane and the drive to go get her to bring her to Helena is taxing and flights are expensive. Trains make so much sense and will give people the opportunity to travel as they age.

MaryAnne Dunwell, State representative, is in support. Citizens are fascinated and supportive. She encourages the Commission to appoint someone to join the Authority. The train would provide the chance for people to travel and see the state. It would be a perfect pairing for the Heritage Center. The passenger rail is an opportunity to connect people into "one" Montana. It will be a travel friendly way to connect to more communities. It can end polarization.

Bob Goodwyn, resident, is in support and would be beneficial for local businesses.

Linda Gryczan, resident, uses public transportation. The current rail transport that is available is five hours away and the bus takes two days. But the schedule doesn't match up with the train schedule. Having the rail here would be beneficial in public transportation.

Jo Ann Gores, resident, is in support. The land exchange between the government and the railroads involved including passenger rail. If they were going to give land to the freight, it would also need to be given to the passenger trains. Local people want to be able to get around the state to games, etc. and have a good time and not have to drive home. It would be a safer way to travel to and from activities.

Jordan Coneley, Downtown Helena Inc. represents downtown businesses, and they are in favor. Travel between communities is greatly needed. It would be a strong investment for the community. The personal and professional opportunities by living next to a passenger rail are immense and it would be a significant loss to the community if the opportunity is missed.

Norane Freistadt; spoke about the disabled community and what a benefit this train would be to those people who cannot independently drive, along with school kids. Her daughter has Cerebral Palsy and does not have the reflexes to drive on a freeway. These people are often overlooked. Please consider these people in your decision

Linda Beischel, resident, stated the old passenger rail used to take people up to Great Divide Ski area. There are many tourist opportunities with the development of the rail system.

Sandy Shull, resident and business owner, does not want Helena to lose this opportunity. She feels that because the Commission has been busy with other things has prevented them from making a decision. She stated the airport only has two flights in and out of Helena now. There is a reason to be the leader as the Capital of Montana and needs to be part of this.

Arnie Gidlow, Missouri Riverside in Cascade, is part of the tourism industry. The rail will not only help the residents but will bring tourism. People want more Montana, and this will provide a way for people to see more Montana. Please get behind this project.

Joe Stephens, resident, had sent out an email to the Commission stating his views and list of benefits. There were videos of testimony of support from Montana Senators. An additional option for transportation is beneficial to the citizens getting older to visit family without the expense of flying. Please take into consideration elected official's support.

Susan DeBree, resident, recalls a time when she was young that she was on a train to visit family in Washington. Roads and passes are difficult to travel for the elderly. Economically it can be a hub for people who need to visit Helena for all reasons including getting to and from the VA.

Martin Baumann, 2013 Lockey Avenue, recalled the 80's when the passenger rail extended to several places in the country. It would be a shame not to have the train come through Helena.

Commissioner McCormick acknowledges the delay in meeting. This forum is the broadest exposure in this setting. It is televised and reaching an audience while a meeting would not reach as many people. The Commission has not said no to this. The Commission continues to be engaged and has contributed \$20,000 toward expenses for the Rail Authority to continue work with the feasibility study. He attended the summit that was held this summer and learned a lot with some questions being answered at that time. He has compiled all the information received to date. He looks forward to the results of the feasibility report, including improving the freight rail and how passenger train will integrate with that.

Commissioner Rolfe stated he was also a rider of the passenger rail as a child and looks back on that with fond memories. He also had family that would visit by way of the rail. He appreciates the assurance in other places that there is not a cost to local government for operations. Government is cautious when it comes to the tax money collected especially with inflation the way it is right now. He will take it into closer consideration.

Commissioner Hunthausen is in support of the rail. He feels like it is low risk with high benefits. He thinks it's important to participate.

Commissioner McCormick stated ongoing interest and continued engagement. Determining rail routes and long-distance route is being mapped out. Many intercity rail systems operate with Amtrack. Those intercity rails require local funding and are apart from the long-distance route. The length of the route boils down to who funds it, but another point is the percentage of expenses covered by the passenger called the fare box recovery, It is about 65% with a 35% federal subsidy to operate that. They are waiting for the updated feasibility report that lines all that out with updated information being gathered. The questions they have will all be answered in that study. The resolution is a binding document and becomes a governing body and before signing, they needed to understand the ability to exit and the answer is in the bylaws. The feasibility report should be complete within the next year and will answer questions and point out what needs to be done.

Adjourn

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 10:03 am.

Meeting minutes approved on Jan 12, 2023

LEWIS AND CLARK COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS


Tom Rolfe, Chair


Andy Hunthausen, Vice Chair


Candace Payne, Member

ATTEST:


Amy Reeves, Clerk of the Board