

Gorham-Westbrook-Portland Rapid Transit Study

Project Advisory Group (PAG)

July 13, 2023
10:00–11:00 am
Meeting Notes

PAG Members in Attendance: Jeremiah Bartlett and Nell Donaldson (City of Portland); Leah Sirmin (Federal Transit Administration); Rebecca Grover (Maine Turnpike Authority); Eamonn Dundon (Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce); Kevin Jensen (Town of Gorham); Mike Arsnow (MaineHealth); and Justin Barker (Portland Housing Authority). Additional representatives from FTA (Eric Papetti), the City of Portland (Bruce Hyman), MaineDOT (Ryan Neale), GP Metro (Mike Tremblay), and NNEPRA (William Gayle) were also in attendance.

Project Team in Attendance: Andrew Clark and Chris Chop (GPCOG); Theresa Carr and Joe Poirier (Nelson\Nygaard); Anne Galbraith (ASG Planning)

Welcome and Introduction

Andrew Clark, Transit Program Manager for GPCOG, gave a general project update indicating the purpose of this meeting is to share the results of the Tier 2 Evaluation and draft project recommendations. Andrew reminded the group of their advisory role on the project and thanked them for their valuable input which has helped to ensure the study progresses on the right path.

Project Update

Theresa Carr, Project Manager for Nelson\Nygaard, reviewed the overall project purpose and goals. This study will identify a 'locally preferred alternative'—including a set of recommendations and implementation strategy—which local stakeholders would like to advance into more detailed design. She recapped work performed to date including the development of alignments and the Tier 1/Tier 2 evaluation process.

Tier 2 Evaluation Results

Joe Poirier, Deputy Project Manager for Nelson\Nygaard, described the four alternatives that emerged from the Tier 1 Evaluation. All four follow the same alignment between Gorham and downtown Westbrook and through downtown Portland.

- Alternative 1: This follows the most direct route between USM Gorham and downtown Portland. It would travel via Route 25, Main Street and Brighton Avenue past USM Portland onto Deering Avenue and continuing to the eastern waterfront.

- Alternative 2: This is similar to Alternative 1, but turns off Brighton Avenue onto Stevens Avenue to travel more closely to the Portland Transportation Center and directly to Maine Medical Center.
- Alternative 3: This option turns off Brighton Avenue at Woodford Avenue, serving Woodford's Corner and USM Portland via lower Forest Avenue.
- Alternative 4: This option turns off Main Street in Westbrook near Rock Row to follow Larrabee Road, Riverside Street, Warren Avenue, and a longer segment of Forest Avenue.

Some alignment revisions were made since the last PAG meeting based on conversations with the three municipalities. The team is still refining the alignment in downtown Westbrook, and tentatively proposes service operate on William Clarke Drive in the *outbound* direction and Main Street in the *inbound* direction. The team is also still refining the alignment in downtown Portland, and tentatively proposes service operate on either Congress Street or Cumberland Avenue, and Franklin and Commercial/Thames streets to the Eastern Waterfront.

The Tier 2 Evaluation was based on 17 criteria that align with project goals. Each alternative was tested twice: 1) as a full Gorham to Portland alternative; and 2) as a potential 'Phase 1' alternative running only between Westbrook and Portland. Based on municipal and other stakeholder comments, the project team also tested the sensitivity of different service frequencies and of adding park-and-ride capacity in Gorham (no specific location has been identified, but sites at USM Gorham and other locations will be studied). Alternative 1 was found to be the best-performing alternative due to the following key findings:

- Alternative 1 generates about 13% **more ridership** than the next-closest alternative—approximately 3,300 versus 2,900 for Alternative 2.
- It has the **fastest travel time** between Westbrook and downtown Portland
- There is a **higher density** of population and jobs served along the corridor
- Alternatives 1 and 2 were the **highest-ranked by the public**, and Alternative 1 was the **highest-ranked by Portland residents**.
- It is the only alternative to serve both **key destinations** of Maine Medical Center and USM Portland, projected to be two of the highest-ridership stops on the route.
- Alternative 1 has strong **equity outcomes**, and is tied for first in serving the most households without autos and low-income households.
- The operating cost per passenger would be 20% **more efficient** than the next-closest alternative, and there would be considerable savings if Alternative 1 absorbs GP Metro's current Husky Line—which would need to continue to operate in the other alternatives—and some or all of Route 4.
- Alternative 1 has **lower capital cost**, due mainly to its shorter length.

In evaluating whether Alternative 1 should run from Portland to Gorham or only Westbrook, the longer route performs better. By serving USM and a potential park-and-ride market, it would attract more riders. By fully absorbing the Husky Line, it would be more cost-efficient. And, it represents a more regional approach to transit.

Draft Recommendations

Andrew Clark shared a map with draft recommendations for advancing Alternative 1. The map shows what the service could look like and where potential rapid transit stops are being considered, but there are many details to be worked out. Current assumptions include:

- The route would be similar to and would subsume GP Metro's Husky Line. Specific impacts to Route 4 have not yet been determined.
- Proposed weekday service frequency would be every 10 minutes between Portland and Westbrook, with 20-minute frequency to Gorham (every other trip). Early morning and evening service would be 20 minutes/40 minutes. Andrew noted this level of frequency has the potential to be very transformative in terms of attracting transit ridership.
- Rapid transit service would offer high-quality infrastructure and amenities:
 - GP Metro's fleet would be expanded and deploy zero-emission vehicles.
 - Both vehicles and infrastructure would be branded to distinguish the rapid transit service.
 - Dedicated bus lanes would be introduced where they can be accommodated, as well as queue jumps and transit signal priority at intersections. Dedicated transit lanes would be the most impactful in terms of travel time savings and ridership.
 - Stations would offer shelter, seating, and many would offer technology such as off-board fare payment and real-time arrival information. Bike and pedestrian access improvements near stops would also be included.
- There would be a park-and-ride facility in Gorham to capture ridership from the west. A location has yet to be determined.

The focus at this phase is identifying the best alignment and mode, and refining the plan with the three municipalities, GP Metro, MaineDOT, and others. Future design phases would finalize the details (for example, the location of stops, dedicated bus lanes, and other priority treatments, end-of-line considerations, on-street parking impacts, changes to local bus service).

PAG Questions/Discussion

- Can the draft recommendations be shared with the public if details are still to be confirmed?
 - Yes, this is a public meeting and materials will be posted for the public.
- How might different operational plans for the Husky Line and Route 4 affect future ridership?

- Ridership was estimated using FTA's STOPS ridership model and assumed that Alternative 1 absorbs the Husky Line and Route 4. Some of the 3,300 riders predicted represent people switching to this better service from those routes. If Route 4 continues to operate, ridership on the new rapid transit service would decrease a bit.
- The Town of Gorham representative thanked the project team for working with Town staff so thoughtfully. He asked if USM has expressed any programming changes that would impact travel flows between campuses.
 - USM is currently growing the Portland campus, but also have noted that many students continue to take classes on both campuses, so they expect travel demand between Gorham and Portland to continue.
 - Increasing the frequency of service from 30 minutes to 20 minutes will help attract more riders. GP Metro currently adjusts service based on class times, but at the higher frequency won't need to do this.
- Can you explain what sort of infrastructure could be accommodated along Brighton Avenue?
 - Most design details will be finalized in future project engineering. But we have evaluated the existing right-of-way and where there are opportunities to accommodate transit priority treatments. We know this is a busy, constrained section of roadway and are working with the City of Portland to identify opportunities which could include dedicated lanes, queue jumps, and/or transit signal priority. There are some good examples from around the United States where rapid transit fits within older, more constrained corridors.
 - City of Portland representatives noted that it is challenging to visualize how the proposed changes on Brighton Avenue would look, and what to help decision-makers understand the benefits and impacts so we advance a good plan into the next phase. Practicality and implementability are important project goals. Perhaps visual examples of similar treatments in other locations and what made them successful would help our decision-makers understand what will be on the ground.
 - GPCOG agreed visuals and graphics could help inform the ongoing conversation about refining the specific locations and transit priority treatments.
 - Theresa Carr emphasized that the project has performed a feasibility assessment which determined there is a design envelope that can accommodate certain transit priority treatments on Brighton Avenue. The ongoing conversation between the City of Portland and project team will focus on balancing the tradeoffs related to where and what these treatments are.
 - The City of Portland noted these conversations and examples may be helpful along Congress Street as well (for example, where might sidewalks get smaller to accommodate transit priority?).

Next Steps and Public Comment

Anne Galbraith, ASG Planning, shared next steps for the project. Round 3 of public outreach will begin later this month; specific locations and activities will be posted on the project website. PAG members helped get the word out during last winter's outreach and it was much appreciated. GPCOG will send out a flyer and other links for PAG members to share with their constituents.

After Round 3 of outreach is completed, we will work with the communities to further refine recommendations in line with public comment and project goals. We anticipate one last PAG meeting to share the final recommendation, before GPCOG submits the recommended locally preferred alternative to PACTS for consideration and adoption.

Public Comment

A meeting attendee was unable to get his microphone working to submit comments during the meeting but submitted the following comments and questions to GPCOG by email.

- I live and work on the Peninsula and just took the bus for the first time last week. Keep up the good work! I loved the ideas discussed today.
 - For transit to be successful it needs to be frequent, high quality, well planned and of course, competitive with driving. It is clear after this meeting there's a lot of work going into addressing this and I am so excited to see it.
 - Infrequent service and long travel times compared to driving will keep me from riding more often so the mention of 10 minute headways was reassuring.
 - I would love to see integration with bike paths and bike infrastructure at stations like covered bike storage and access to city bike share programs.
 - What are the rapid transit alternatives being compared to?
 - The Tier 2 Evaluation compared four alternative alignments to each other in terms of how well they served the project goals. A 'no-build' or 'do nothing' alternative was not explicitly evaluated, but essentially each alternative was compared to existing GP Metro service in the study area.
 - Will the project coordinate with proposals for commuter rail service on the Peninsula? Multimodal connections such as BRT platforms at the train station and schedule coordination between the two would be a rider's dream come true!
 - NNEPRA is studying relocating the train station to St. John Street to eliminate the need for trains to back onto the spur line to serve the existing Portland Transportation Center which takes 15-20 minutes. NNEPRA has yet to identify an exact location, but we hope it is sited where it can easily be integrated into the rest of the transit network.