
2 The Central Mass. Right-of-Way

This chapter includes a brief history of rail service, followed by a physical description of the corridor including adjacent land use and the width of the right-of-way. The chapter ends with a discussion of environmental issues and current uses.

A History of Rail Service

In 1869, the Massachusetts Central Railroad began construction of the Central Mass. line. Service began between Hudson and Boston in 1881, and a year later was extended west through Berlin and Clinton to Holden. In 1887, the line reached its maximum length, extending from Boston to Northampton.³ As a result of corporate mergers and leases, by 1900 the Central Mass. had become part of the Boston & Maine Railroad.

Passenger service on the Central Mass. peaked in 1903 with fourteen round trips per day. A series of cutbacks on passenger service ensued. By 1958, the outer limit of passenger service was cut back to Hudson and frequency was reduced to two round-trips a day. By 1959, service was reduced to a single round-trip per day, and by 1965, service only went as far west as South Sudbury. In 1968, passenger counts averaged 77 riders a day (weekday inbound). In 1971, passenger service ended, due to deteriorating tracks, low ridership, and budgetary constraints. An experimental increase of frequency to four round-trips per day in the final weeks failed to attract substantial numbers of additional passengers.

The majority of freight service ended by 1981. A number of industrial parks and lumber yards kept freight service open as late as 1994 in parts of Waltham.

The idea of reinstating rail service on the Central Mass. has been brought up many times. Studies, including one completed last year, indicate that such service is not feasible at the present time due to low ridership and high capital and operating costs.⁴ The MBTA Planning Department, however, recently expressed interest in studying the possibility of a dedicated busway facility on the Central Mass.

³ The western end of the right-of-way, between Amherst and Northampton, has been converted to the Norwottuck Rail Trail, a DEM facility.

⁴ CTPS, Central Mass. Commuter Rail Feasibility Study, December 1996.

B Description of the Right-of-Way

The following is a physical description of the right-of-way.

Berlin

MBTA ownership of the right-of-way begins just east of Coburn Road. Heading east, the embankment is quite high and the right-of-way remains clear. Between the Highland Street and Sawyer Hill Road intersections (at-grade), the right-of-way runs on a high embankment over a stream valley, then passes through an opening cut through rock.

East of Sawyer Hill Road, the right-of-way passes on an intact embankment through the southern part of Hog Swamp, an extensive partly wooded and partly open wetland. West of I-495 is a commuter parking lot on the north side of Route 62, adjacent to the Central Mass. At I-495, there are two underpasses (for the north and south barrels of I-495), both about 20 feet wide, in good condition, and adequate for a trail. The right-of-way passes over a small stream that runs along the median of I-495.

Hudson

Proceeding into Hudson, the right-of-way is clear for two hundred yards and then becomes overgrown with brush. There are a few houses to the north that are close to the right-of-way. Further east a contractor has used much of the right-of-way for storing large piles of rubble, trucks, and heavy machinery. Still further east, a trucking company is using the right-of-way to park trucks and store dumpsters. East of Central Street, houses to the south are very close. A large warehouse is to the north.

Through the center of town, the right-of-way is unobstructed. Just west of Felton Street, part of the right-of-way has been paved for church parking. There is a section between Manning Street and Church Street where the walkway over Bruce Pond has been maintained for pedestrian use (top photo on cover). This bridge provides one of the most beautiful views on the corridor. Sections between Priest Street and Cox Street have been cleared recently by volunteer crews. The bridge over the Assabet River is in good condition. There is a culvert east of Cox Street and a high embankment.

The Marlborough Branch rail line merges with the Central Mass. just west of Wilkins Street. The Wilkins Street bridge has been removed and the Chestnut Street tunnel is filled. The eastern part of Hudson is very picturesque, in particular the bridge that goes over the Fort Meadow Brook. A cement company is very close to both sides of the right-of-way just west of the Main Street crossing.

Sudbury

Entering Sudbury, the right-of-way is very clear. To the north is posted federal land (an old Army base). Further east, conservation land abuts the right-of-way, with signs prohibiting motorized vehicles. The first bridge over Hop Brook in Sudbury affords spectacular views of wetlands and meadows. Just across the Dutton Road intersection a new housing development is under construction. The right-of-way is passable to Union Avenue. The Lowell-Sudbury line crosses the Central Mass. at the former South Sudbury Station just before Union Avenue (see middle photo on cover). The section that parallels Station Road is quite overgrown.

At the Route 20 intersection there is a handcar shed that has been maintained by the Sudbury Valley Trustees and serves as a picturesque remnant of the Central Mass. line. Here, Hop Brook parallels the right-of-way for a few hundred feet. The right-of-way passes below Landham Road (which used to be the location of East Sudbury Station) under a large overpass. For the next mile, the right-of-way is very overgrown. Just before the Wayland town line, power lines begin to run along the right-of-way and do so through Wayland, Weston, and into Waltham.

Wayland

Upon entering Wayland the right-of-way enters the Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge (see bottom photo on cover). It passes through the vast scenic area on an intact embankment. There is a wide bridge over the Sudbury River. After crossing to the north side of Route 20, the right-of-way runs along the former Raytheon site. Just before Route 27 is the former Wayland Station, now owned by the town. After crossing Routes 27 and 126, the corridor is wide and there are indications of substantial use by walkers, runners, mountain bicyclists, and equestrians.

Weston

The right-of-way in Weston remains open for the first couple of miles. It goes under Concord Road and then becomes impassable due to trees and brush. The Conant Road intersection was filled in during a bridge reconstruction and is surrounded by extremely dense brush. Further east to Church Street, the right-of-way is very wide and unobstructed. East of Church Street, wood chips on the tracks and a worn path indicate significant use of the right-of-way. Further east there is a new development on the north side of the right-of-way. To the south is a steep embankment that abuts land belonging to a sand and gravel company. Before entering Waltham, the right-of-way crosses the Fitchburg commuter rail line on a wide, high bridge.

Waltham

After the Fitchburg commuter rail bridge, the right-of-way enters the City of Waltham. There is a fenced-in gravel pit to the south and an abandoned office building to the north. Further east, the right-of-way goes through an auto-parts yard. The bridge over Route 128 (I-95) is intact. After the first two intersections in Waltham, the right-of-way is impassable for a short distance. The right-of-way then opens up with abutters to the south and condominiums on a hill to the north. There is a very high chain-link fence on the south side that separates an office building from the right-of-way. Further east, the right-of-way passes through an apartment complex, in the middle of which is a spectacular view of Lyman Pond. There are high bridges over Beaver Brook and over Route 60 (Linden Street), then a high embankment. For the next 200 feet, Beaver Brook winds back and forth beneath the right-of-way under three culverts and bridges while the Fitchburg commuter rail parallels the right-of-way on the south. The two corridors merge near the Beaver Street intersection. MBTA ownership ends at Beaver Street in Waltham.

Belmont

A private company bought the right-of-way from Beaver Street to the Belmont border. The Central Mass. originally extended through Belmont and into Cambridge and Boston, parallel to the Fitchburg line. It appears that the right-of-way is wide enough to allow a trail. Such construction would require either purchase of private sections or easements from private owners. A section east of Belmont Center, from Brighton Street to Alewife Station, is owned by the MDC.

There are extremely short sections of the right-of-way in Bolton, Stow and Marlborough. If a trail is built, these sections would be taken care of by the adjacent communities. That is, rather than Bolton maintaining a slice of the trail, Berlin and Hudson would jointly decide where their respective segments meet. Likewise, Hudson would take the extra feet in Stow and the Marlborough section would be handled by Hudson and/or Sudbury.

C Right-of-Way Width

According to the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), the preferred width for a trail is 12 feet. In addition to this, another 3 feet on each side is recommended for clearance, yielding a total width of 18 feet.

As a whole, the Central Mass. line has ample space for a trail; a high percentage of the right-of-way is more than 80 feet wide.

From Coburn Road in Berlin to the Hudson line, the right-of-way is at least 80 feet wide. There are a few short sections just west of Highland Road where the right-of-way juts out to over 200 feet (each about one hundred feet long).

At the Hudson-Berlin line, the right-of-way is about 80 feet wide. A few hundred yards west of the Central Street intersection in Hudson, it briefly widens in two places to 130 and 190 feet. East of Central Street (downtown Hudson), the right-of-way varies in width from 100 feet to 40 feet, with a high percentage between 65 and 40 feet. From Tower Street east to the Sudbury line, the right-of-way fluctuates between 70 and 85 feet, with the majority around 80 feet wide.

Continuing into Sudbury at about 80 feet, the right-of-way crosses Hop Brook on a small bridge. The 80-foot-width is maintained through most of Sudbury, with a few short 60-foot sections. The right-of-way width going under Landham Road is about 40 feet.

The right-of-way is 80 feet wide as it enters Wayland and crosses the Sudbury River. Near Wayland center, just west of the fork at Routes 27 and 126, the right-of-way narrows to 25 feet for about one hundred feet.

Entering Weston, the right-of-way is about 80 feet wide. It narrows to about 60 feet on the east side of Conant Street. Within fifty yards, it broadens back out to about 80 feet. East of Church Street there are significant portions of the right-of-way that are 115 to 120 feet wide.

In Waltham the right-of-way decreases back to about 80 feet, with a couple of areas that flare out to about 100 feet. It fluctuates quite a bit between 60 and 80 feet. On the east side of Lexington Street, the right-of-way is 20 feet wide and gradually widens to 60 feet over a length of five hundred feet. The right-of-way then fluctuates between 60 and 80 feet, ending at Beaver Street with a width of about 70 feet.

D Environmental Issues

According to Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) regulations, bicycle facilities are categorical exemptions, which means they are exempt from requiring environmental impact statements. They are subject to the provisions of the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). All of the provisions of this act would be followed during the design and construction phases, with oversight by the local conservation commissions. (A brief listing of potential regulatory permits and approvals is found in Appendix B.)

The noise levels from the trail would be minimal, as no motor vehicles would be allowed (police and other service vehicles excepted). The

overall air quality effect would be positive because the trail is expected to eliminate some motor vehicle trips, especially short trips or so-called "cold starts," which on a per mile basis contribute disproportionately to air quality degradation.

To assess flood plain issues, Flood Insurance Rate Maps were obtained from the Department of Environmental Management, Office of Water Resources. These maps divide land into three categories: Zone C (areas of minimal flooding), Zone B (areas between limits of 500-year flood and 100-year flood), and Zone A (areas of 100-year flood).

Zone C is considered land not subject to floods. Zone B would be considered land subject to flooding in extreme circumstances and are given a 0.2 to 1.0 percent chance of flooding in a given year.⁵ Zone A is land given a 1.0 percent chance of flooding in a given year.

Over 80 percent of the right-of-way passes through Zone C land and is not of concern in terms of flooding. Seven percent is in or adjacent to Zone B land and 11 percent is in or adjacent to Zone A land. Locations and lengths of Zone A and B segments are indicated in Appendix B (Tables B-2 and B-3). In some cases, the right-of-way embankment is high and wide enough that trail construction would have no impact on the adjacent lands that are zoned A or B. It might also be assumed that the original rail-bed embankment was designed and constructed to avoid flood hazard.

Requirements for these areas would be worked out in the design phase, through orders of conditions issued by the local conservation commissions. Possibilities include compensatory storage (for increases in fill), a narrowing of the trail, or alternative construction methods.

E Current Uses

The MBTA has neither posted "No Trespassing" signs nor in any known way attempted to prohibit trespassing on the right-of-way. Present uses include hiking, mountain biking, snowmobiling, and horseback riding. In addition, there are encroachments and occasional instances of dumping.

A number of businesses have leased portions of the right-of-way from the MBTA. Some of the leases are very minor (water pipes and transmission lines), while others are more significant. Some of the notable leases include a trucking company's parking and storage facility, a parking lot for a bank, and a driveway crossing for a cement company. All leases have a thirty-day

⁵ Zone B also includes: certain areas subject to 100-year flooding with depths of less than one foot or where the contributing drainage area is less than one square mile; areas protected by levies from the base flood.

termination clause. It is possible that, if a trail is built, the MBTA would continue leases that are compatible with trail construction.

The Boston Edison Company has erected power lines along 7.2 miles of the right-of-way between eastern Sudbury and Waltham. The company has a permanent easement for this use, originally acquired in 1951 from the Boston and Maine Corporation and extended in 1984 with the MBTA takeover of the line. According to Boston Edison, it mows and clears vegetation every three to five years to maintain access to its facilities.

The electric and magnetic field (EMF) reading of this power line is the third lowest in the Boston Edison system.⁶ It has a maximum reading of 20 milligauss (mG) within the right-of-way. Fifty feet from the south side of the right-of-way the EMF reading is 3.8 mG, and 0.7 mG on the north side. The allowable state standard is 85 mG at the edge of a right-of-way.

There has been concern for many years that EMF's can harm people. The National Research Council (NRC) completed a study last year which concluded, "The findings to date do not support claims that electromagnetic fields are harmful to a person's health."⁷ The NRC study examined over 500 studies done since 1979.

⁶ Information provided by Boston Edison letter; December 30, 1996.

⁷ Charles F. Stevens, Chair, Committee on the Possible Effects of Electromagnetic Fields on Biologic Systems, study sponsored by U.S. Department of Energy.

