

Amtrak service for Chester and Ludlow? One man has the vision

Town Planner Preston Bristow asks you to weigh in on Vermont Rail Plan

By **Cynthia Prairie** · The Chester Telegraph · October 30, 2024 · © 2024 Telegraph Publishing LLC

Preston Bristow wants to see a passenger train run northwest through Chester. The Town Planner for Chester said while it might be years away, he's getting the idea in front of town residents, Amtrak and the Vermont Agency of Transportation now to begin the process.

"Many believe we are entering a 'New Era of Rail.' The Vermont Tourism Department offers 'Travel by Train' long weekend itineraries, and wouldn't it be great if Chester and Okemo could be included?" he told The Chester Telegraph last week, adding that there are other rail possibilities, including regular passenger service on the highly used north-south routes.

As an example, Bristow says Amtrak is already planning on extending its two Valley Flyers to Brattleboro and later to White River Junction, so why not add a "Rutland Flyer" that would head northwest from Bellows Falls with stops in Chester, Ludlow and Rutland? "It would take years for such a train to become a reality, but everything involving rail takes years, and as I quote myself saying, 'we have to start somewhere,'" he says.

Air your views now in Vermont Rail Plan survey

That "somewhere" is with the 2025 Vermont Rail Plan, which is currently being updated. The plan sets goals for both intercity passenger rail through Amtrak as well as the freight rail system. And Bristow would like the public to weigh in on its ideas for passenger service that would include Chester.

"Ideally, comments for the Rail Plan update should be received by Friday, Nov. 8 in time for the fall meeting of the Vermont Rail Advisory Council on Nov. 12," says Bristow.

[Editor's note, 2026: the comment period has since closed — and the comments worked. The corridor appears in the adopted 2025 plan. The story of what happened. (/news)]

Bristow is hoping that Chester residents will support his efforts by taking part in the survey. He suggests that commenters say something along the lines of "In addition to extending Amtrak's Valley Flyer trains to White River Junction, I support routing a Valley Flyer along the state-owned rail line from Bellows Falls through Chester and Ludlow to Rutland." Be sure to check "Service" under the question "What theme does your comment relate to?"

Chester is no stranger to rail service, which helped grow the town when it arrived in 1849, seeing the establishment of a thriving passenger and freight service. According to Buildings of New England, by the 1890s, the growth of industrial and commercial businesses around the Chester Depot made it "one of the busiest stations on the Rutland RR. The State purchased the line in 1963, leasing it in part to the Green Mountain RR."

While passenger rail died out in the area, for almost 20 years Chester was a crucial stop for the Steamtown excursions, which ran from Walpole, N.H., Bellows Falls and Chester using a collection of 35 steam locomotives and 25 pieces of rolling stock. By the early 1980s, Steamtown moved its equipment to a permanent collection in Pennsylvania.

Bristow sees a revival of rail for Chester and Ludlow. As Town Planner, he says, "I try to promote opportunities that help Chester prosper and improve the quality of life for Chester residents. Amtrak service to Chester would do that at a fraction of the environmental impact of cars or planes. I believe the demand for passenger rail in this country will grow and I want us to be ready. Being recognized as an initiative in the Vermont Rail Plan is a way to start getting resources to study the viability of such a train. Chester itself may not be a big passenger draw but Okemo could be. The tracks pass between the resort and Jackson Gore."

He adds, "There is great cachet in being an Amtrak-served community. Amtrak connects small town America to the national economy," and is more energy efficient and comfortable than cars or planes. "Having Amtrak service would make Chester a more attractive place to live, to vacation and to have a business."

"Rail stations themselves often become the focus of community redevelopment activity," he says, sounding very much like the Town Planner he is. "Chester has a historic depot with lots of potential. Ludlow is without a functioning depot, but there is the potential for a new intermodal station at the Blue Lot on Witalec Road."

But his vision doesn't stop in Ludlow — or even in Rutland. "By the time an Amtrak train arrives in Chester, there would hopefully be connections to Montreal and Boston as well as New York City."

Nor does his vision for a local Amtrak stop end with his planned retirement in June of 2025. "Bringing Amtrak to Chester is a project I would like to continue with."

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Chester Planner Preston Bristow rides an Amtrak train several weeks ago. He has a vision for passenger train travel for local communities. Photo provided. *(Caption as it ran in 2024.)*