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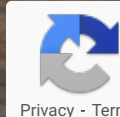
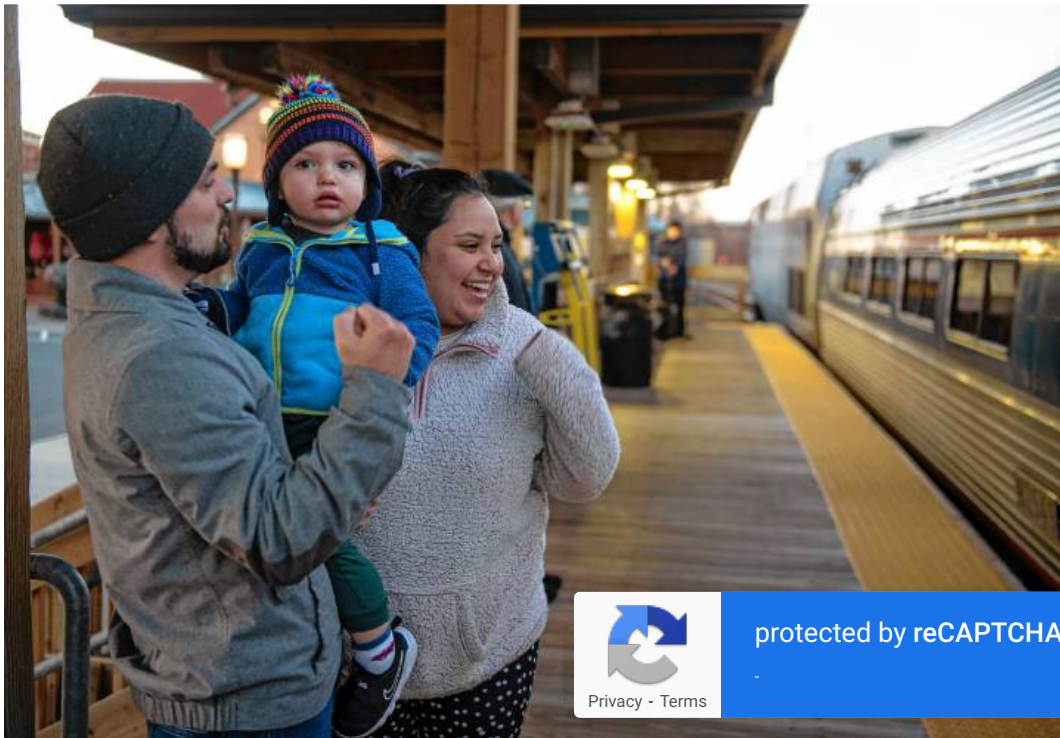
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## All aboard: Train travel picks up steam in Pioneer Valley, region



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*Cam Brown holds his son, Dominic Brown, with his wife and Dominic's mother, Ximena Cruz de Brown, as they wait for Cruz de Brown's parents to arrive by train at the Northampton station. STAFF PHOTO/CAROL LOLLIS*

By [EMILEE](#)

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NORTHAMPTON — New York resident Cara Erdman can't drive to her family's home in Northampton for the holidays.

Erdman lives in the city and rides public transit for transportation. Since she doesn't own a car, Erdman often rides Amtrak's Vermonter line from Penn Station in New York to Union Station in Northampton.

"It's an environmentally friendly option, it's cheaper and it's the only way I can get here from New York," Erdman said.



She isn't alone. Mount Holyoke College student Jalila Nazerali-Ruddy sits in the December cold while she waits for her train to arrive. While she prefers to travel in a vehicle over trains, the Vermonter alleviates the hassle of holiday travel to her home in Montpelier, Vermont.

"I don't have a car so it's my only option. It's very convenient because even though I go to Mount Holyoke, getting to Northampton isn't a hassle and [the train] literally drops me off at my hometown," Nazerali-Ruddy said.

Erdman and Nazerali-Ruddy are part of a growing Amtrak ridership who rely on trains to travel around the Northeast. Convenience combined with cost-effective fares have drawn passengers to commute and travel by train.

"There's a new, younger generation of individuals who don't necessarily want to own a car, who want to be able to get wherever it is they need to go and are much more open and receptive to using public transportation," said Dana Roscoe, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission's transportation manager.

In fact, the rail industry has bounced back to pre-pandemic numbers. Amtrak witnessed a 24% increase in ridership nationwide in fiscal year 2023 compared to fiscal year 2022, and a 29% uptick in the Northeast alone. Trains servicing Northampton and Springfield mirror these trends: Vermonter ridership increased 14%, Berkshire Flyer ridership increased 47% and New Haven–Springfield ridership, which includes the Valley Flyer, increased 36%.

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“It signals something that people in our region have thought about for a long time, that a rail revolution in western Mass would be successful and that if we created services through public investment, people would use them,” said state Sen. Jo Comerford, D-Northampton.

In response to the growing ridership, Amtrak added two new trains between New York and Springfield in June 2023. Night owl fares, affordable one-way tickets between \$5 and \$20, now include trips between New York and Boston.

Supported by the success of trains this year, Massachusetts advanced two highly anticipated Amtrak rail projects — an east-west line between Boston and western Massachusetts and the Boston-Albany corridor from Boston to New York.

The Federal Railroad Administration awarded Massachusetts \$108 million to begin planning the section of the east-west rail between Worcester and Springfield. Earlier this month, the state Department of Transportation received \$500,000 to study the Boston-Albany corridor, the first step in expanding service from one trip a day to eight round-trips between Boston, Springfield and Albany per day.

“That’s been a long time coming,” said Zane Lumelsky, co-founder of Trains in the Valley, a rail advocacy group. “MassDOT applied for it quite a while ago. The initial indication was they were going to get it, and it finally arrived.”

Springfield’s Union Station will stand at the center of the east-west compass rail. The city will connect Connecticut to the south, Vermont and, potentially, Montreal to the north, Boston to the east and New York to the west.

“People in western Massachusetts and people wanting to get to western Massachusetts will get there by rail if we give them the opportunity,” said Comerford, a member of the East-West Rail Commission in the state Legislature. “This is good for every reason you can imagine — it’s good for development, it’s good for climate, it’s good for population growth, it’s good for the workforce.”

Roscoe notices the growing popularity of rail as a form of public transportation. He has a picture in his office of 150 people waiting to board a train at Union Station in Northampton, the line of passengers extending out into the parking lot. While the Vermonter, with one daily train each way, services stations from St. Albans, Vermont, to Washington D.C., the two most popular destinations remain New York City and Northampton.

“It’s remarkable that ridership in Northampton is so high. We’re at nearly 30,000 riders a year boarding and alighting from Northampton,” Roscoe said. “So that, coupled with the opportunity to have viable east-west rail, which is the Boston service, just really changes the dynamic of passenger rail in western Massachusetts.”

Pioneer Valley residents show interest in commuting by train as well. Roscoe said some of his colleagues at PVPC take the train to work, and Lumelsky has noticed the same trend with people he interviews.

“It took Amtrak a long time to figure out that it’s not just the valley to New York City. There’s a lot of riders within the valley, people who live and/or work in Springfield who need to get north, and people in Greenfield and Northampton who need to get to Springfield,” Lumelsky said.

Despite investment in new train lines, new rail paths require a long and slow process. The east-west rail started the planning phase and won’t begin construction until 2027. Investigations into expanding the Boston-Albany corridor only recently received funding for planning. However, Comerford said these lines are not in competition with each other for funds or a fast finish, but working together to serve the vast regions of the Northeast.

“As people who have been paying for the MBTA with our tax dollars,” she added, “we have the right to demand affordable, available public transit, which is bus and rail.”

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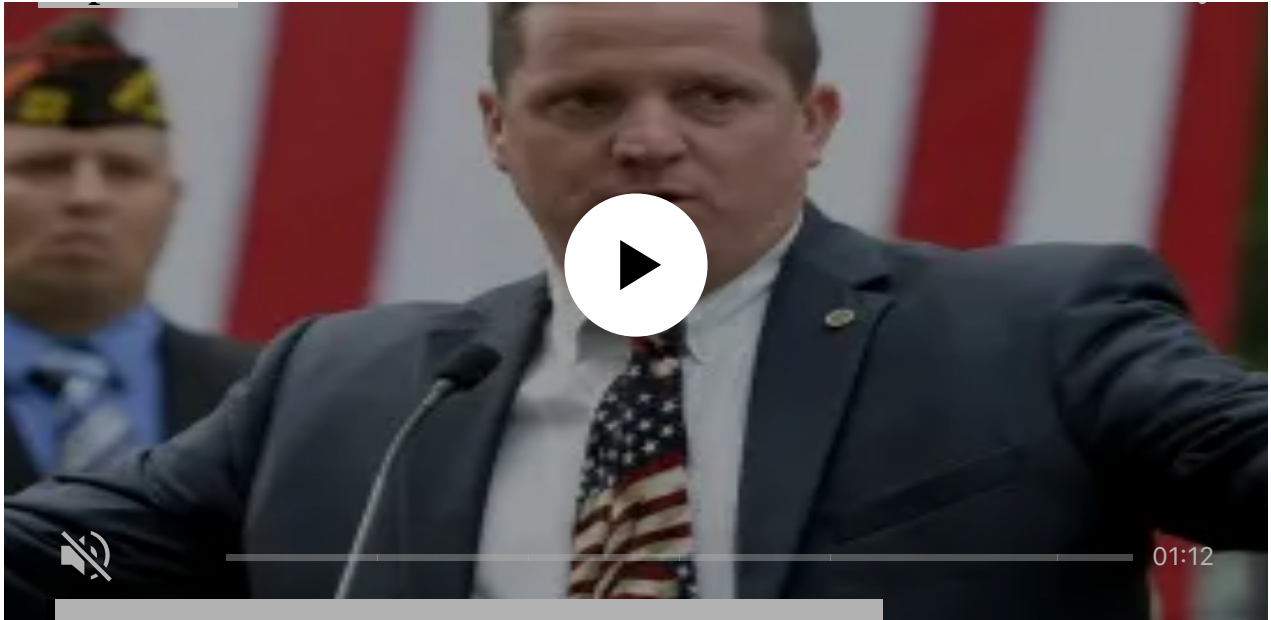
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