

[Matt Sutkoski, Burlington Free Press](#)

Construction crews started working on the railroad Tuesday, thanks to \$50 million in federal stimulus money to improve tracks between St. Albans and Vernon.

Railroad representatives and politicians kicked off the construction at a ceremony at the St. Albans Amtrak station, as politicians hammered a golden spike into the railroad tracks to mark the start of the work.

The construction, expected to take about two years, would improve rail speeds along the path the Amtrak Vermonter takes through the state. Trains would be able to travel at about 79 mph south of White River Junction, up from the current speed of less than 60 mph, said Charles Hunter, director of state relations for RailAmerica Inc., the parent company of New England Central Railroad, which operates the rail line serving the Vermonter and the freight trains that use the tracks.

Speeds on the line north of White River Junction would increase only marginally after the work is done, but better tracks, evened-out curves and other improvements would allow trains to move faster on some sections of the tracks and allow freight trains to bear heavier loads, Hunter said.

New England Central is investing \$20 million in the project, bringing its total cost to about \$70 million.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., said the project does a small part in combating the nation's trend toward deteriorating infrastructure, but he added that much more must be done.

"We have a long, long way to go. This is a beginning, not the end," Sanders said. "I'm going back to Washington Monday, and there will be one or two fights. One of those fights will be whether we give tax breaks to billionaires or whether we invest in projects like this."

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., also said the project is forward-looking and a first step toward establishing and expanding high-speed rail service in the Northeast. "This is the kind of thing we should do," he said.

Gov. Jim Douglas said he hopes other improvements will follow, including service to and from Montreal. "We'll keep filing applications for Burlington to Rutland," the outgoing Republican governor added, referring to long-desired rail improvements along the western side of Vermont.

A grant application for \$71 million that would have connected Burlington with New York City along the state's so-called "western corridor," failed to make the final cut this year. Instead, Vermont received \$500,000 to boost train frequency between Rutland and Albany, N.Y.

The state retains \$22 million in federal money secured by then-Sen. Jim Jeffords to develop the western rail corridor.

With the speeches done Tuesday, the politicians went to the railroad tracks and used a heavy, gold-colored spike driver to drive a gold-colored spike into the tracks, signifying the start of the project. Each of about half a dozen people drove the stake in bit by bit.

A freight train loaded with steel for the project then was supposed to break through a banner announcing the project that was strung across the tracks. Instead, the banner collapsed before the train arrived, and the engine ran over it as it lay on the tracks.

Railroad officials noted the loads of steel rails on the train all were American-produced.

Below are pictures from the groundbreaking:

