



ROY BLANCHARD

Here's an example of regional railroading done right

New England Central has the flavor of success

The New England Central (NECR) is a 343-mile regional railroad with 13 train-starts a day plus two Amtrak trains. It is the former Central Vermont, after 1898 part of the CN-owned Grand Trunk, and that heritage is evident in the 20-stall roundhouse and three-story 1870s headquarters in St. Albans, Vt. It's also apparent in the French-speaking CN train crews who cross the border at East Alburg, Vt., to make interchange in St. Albans. NECR's endpoints are the Quebec border north of St. Albans and New London, Conn.

New England Central is also a railroad that's ideal to showcase some of the outward attributes of a short line or regional railroad that "gets it" and is going to succeed. More on that soon, but first, a bit more about the NECR.

While the short-line norm is to have one or two connecting railroads, NECR has nine: CN, CSX, Pan Am Railways (ex-Guilford), Providence & Worcester, Vermont Rail System's Vermont and Green

Mountain, Washington County, Claremont & Concord, and Massachusetts Central.

New England Central handles more than 43,000 revenue loads a year, about four times the average short-line volume and 13 percent higher in the last five years. Lumber, plywood, paper, building products, wood chips, liquefied petroleum gas, fuel oil, and metals are the principal commodities, one-third of which is bridge traffic. NECR operates 23 locomotives, with mostly SD40-2s and GP40-2s on road trains. The old CV rule of 1,000 more horsepower than trailing tons, backed up by an independent study of tonnage ratings for the railroad, still gets trains over the road at track speed, so a three-unit consist is common for the railroad's typical 8,000-ton trains.

Striking to a first-time visitor is how tidy the NECR property is. Take a walk around the St. Albans engine terminal and note how repair parts are stored — on pallets with tarps with like next to like. Note the dearth of drink cups and soda cans on the ground. Areas are protected with fabric where oil drips and fresh paint covers woodwork. On the Sunday morning I visited with General Manager Charles Hunter, the shops were quiet, but at each work station, signs of Friday's labors were gone and tools and gloves were neatly laid out in anticipation of Monday's assignments.

"Safety first" is more than a motto at NECR. The company has a rule that every employee gets a \$2-a-day bonus for every quarter with no reportable injuries, and the low injury rate shows that the message is hitting home. With 97 employees, that's \$35,000 a year paid out in safety awards — a small price to pay when you consider that one safety slip can cost a short line millions.

One thing I liked in particular was the road's equipment strategy. NECR would rather make it than buy it off the rack — such as a homemade locomotive load box made out of a recycled dynamic brake grid unit, or an indoor drop table for changing out wheelsets, a handy thing to have when it's 30 below and snowing outside.

To visit the NECR from my Philadelphia home, I rode Amtrak's *Vermont*, which runs on NECR's main line, not only because I hadn't been on this route in ages but also to get a good look at it. Of the four states through which NECR passes, only Vermont provides meaningful financial infrastructure support. Yet the track structure — I saw lots of continuous welded rail and 100-lb. jointed rail — let

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us roll along at about 60 mph without spilling a drop of coffee.

Brush cutters had cut a path equal to a full track-width on either side of the main. We felt no dips at crossings or sudden changes in vertical alignment on bridge approaches. It was clear that NECR is keeping speeds up with proper maintenance, and thus has the ability to keep trains moving that generate adequate returns.

Train operations are governed by track warrant from the St. Albans dispatch center, though there is a 25-mile segment with automatic block signals and CTC between Windsor and Bellows Falls,

Vt. The track-warrant system deserves special note because it's all computerized. Meets, overtakes, and maintenance-of-way crews are accommodated with minimal time lost.

For example, suppose a track crew is waiting at Milepost 35 for a southbound freight before continuing its work northward. A southbound train has a warrant from MP 30 to MP 40. As soon as the train clears MP 35, the southbound's warrant between MP 30 and MP 35 has been fulfilled and the track-crew warrant from MP 35 to MP 30 goes into effect. Thus the track crew gets back to work before waiting for the southbound to clear MP 40. Smooth.

The track-warrant system works so well for NECR that parent RailAmerica dispatches several other of its railroads from here: the Indiana & Ohio (formerly CN's Detroit, Toledo & Ironton) between Detroit and Cincinnati and two others (from the same work station). The desk is equipped with pictures of hazards and diagrams of close clearances, blind crossings, or other places where it would be inappropriate to stop a train and create blocked crossings. It's a "cookbook" with recipes for each line so that any dispatcher can sit at any desk and run a fluid railroad.

But the most successful recipe of all is the one that calls for increasing revenue per unit, increasing revenue units, and turning assets quickly. Hunter and his dedicated team of railroaders are to be complimented for using the essential ingredients of successful railroading. Something good is cooking in New England. **I**

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