

Connecticut Public Transportation Commission
Minutes of July 8, 2010

Legislative Office Building, Hearing Room 1-C
Hartford

Attendance: Members: Kevin Maloney, Richard Schreiner, Russ St. John, Alan Sylvestre, Yvonne Loteczka, Richard Sunderhauf, Ed McAnaney, Chris Adams, Gail Lavielle. **Ex-officio members:** Connie Mendolia (DEP), Fred Riese (DEP). **ConnDOT staff:** Dennis King, Andy Davis, Sherry Osterling. **Guests:** Stephen Gazillo, Cara Seabury, Terry Hall, Stephen Troster.

Chairman Maloney called the meeting to order at 1:37 pm. The minutes of the meeting of June 3 were approved as written.

Featured Speaker

Andrew Davis, ConnDOT's project manager for the Danbury Branch Study, explained the purpose of the study and mentioned that the Draft Environmental Impact Statement covering the study would be released for agency review this fall. He then turned the floor over to Stephen Gazillo, Director of Transportation Planning at URS Corporation. Gazillo mentioned that the Danbury Branch rail line has been in service for 150 years. A website providing more details on the study can be accessed at www.danburybranchstudy.com. One element of the study was to conduct a survey of both Danbury Branch train riders as well as households within the Route 7/ the Danbury Branch corridor to survey their travel habits, needs and preferences.

Gazillo then showed a short film about the Danbury Branch Study followed by a PowerPoint presentation providing further details. Five alternative courses of action for the Danbury Branch are being evaluated. These are:

- The No Build Alternative. Evaluation of the No Build or No Action Alternative is a requirement of the National Environmental Policy Act and provides baseline data with which to compare the benefits and impacts of the other alternatives.
- Transportation System Management (TSM) Alternative. TSM is defined as everything that can be done without new construction or new vehicle procurement. The TSM alternative includes the addition of new AM and PM trains, hourly mid-day service to South Norwalk and/or Stamford, more frequent weekend service and enhanced bus service.
- Electrification and other upgrades. This alternative includes curve realignments and track upgrades for an operating speed of 60 mph, station and parking enhancements, bridge upgrades, electrification from South Norwalk to Danbury, new EMU rolling stock, and a new maintenance facility at Danbury.
- Extension of the Danbury Branch service to New Milford. This would extend the existing service 14 miles northward, with new stations at Danbury North, Brookfield and New Milford, and a new maintenance yard at New Milford.

- Partial Electrification Alternative. This would involve electrification of the southern section of the Danbury Branch from South Norwalk to the vicinity of Wilton, and associated track upgrades over this segment.

Public hearings on these alternatives are tentatively scheduled for the winter of 2011. The capital projects to implement these improvements to the Danbury Branch are not currently programmed in ConnDOT's long-term capital plans, other than the CTC project which is currently underway.

Construction of the CTC system began on May 15 and will take two years to complete. Currently, the Danbury Branch is a single track system with no signal system and with manually operated switches.

The three underlying purposes of the Danbury Branch Study are: 1) to improve mobility options for the traveling public in southwestern Connecticut, 2) to maintain and improve commuter rail service in the Danbury Branch corridor, and 3) to help reduce congestion on Route 7. Though the study focuses primarily on the rail corridor from South Norwalk to New Milford, a cursory look at service all the way up to Pittsfield was undertaken.

Work completed to date on the Danbury Branch Study includes a kick-off meeting, coordination meetings, scoping meetings, base mapping and environmental mapping, environmental data collection, evaluation of existing transportation systems and infrastructure, and a draft outline for the environmental impact statement. Conceptual engineering has also been pretty much completed. An agency administrative review draft of the EIS will be available this fall, while the draft EIS release to the public and the associated public hearings will occur early in 2011.

Gazillo then provided additional detail on the options being evaluated. The No Build Alternative would not entail any new capital costs, operating costs or environmental impacts. However, it would not help alleviate air quality non-attainment or roadway congestion in the corridor, nor improve corridor travel times or reliability or encourage transit use. The Transportation System Management Alternative would add rail shuttle service from South Norwalk to Wilton (two trains in the AM and two in the PM), provide hourly mid-day service to Norwalk and/ or Stamford, and provide service every two hours on weekends. It would involve no new capital costs or environmental impacts and would provide more frequent service, improve air quality and support transit-oriented development.

Among the build options, full electrification would have the greatest positive benefits with faster and more frequent service, improved air quality, support for transit-oriented development, a potential reduction in congestion, and the provision of more parking. It would also have the greatest capital and operating costs and environmental impacts from construction and would involve some property acquisition.

If Danbury Branch service were to be extended to New Milford, this could be done with either diesel or electric equipment. In either case, the track would need to be completely rebuilt from Danbury to New Milford and would be constructed to a design speed standard of 79 mph.

New rolling stock would be needed for either the diesel or electric options. For electrification, seven highway bridges would need to be raised to obtain the needed clearances for the catenary. This is a major obstacle to electrification. Housatonic Railroad, the owner of this segment of track, does not favor electrification because of the limitations it would place on vertical clearances. However, Metro-North would prefer to see one uniform power system operated throughout the corridor.

Elements of these various alternatives could be mixed and matched. Curve realignments and bridge upgrades could be done with diesel powered equipment rather than with electrification of the line, for example. The study will provide an implementation plan reflecting a phased-in approach. The intent is for corridor improvements to be phased in so that the upgrading of the Danbury Branch could be a continuous process over several years. The TSM improvements could be in place by the summer of 2012. Full electrification might require ten years, meaning full implementation by 2021. Electrification to the vicinity of Wilton (Alt. E) could go into service a year earlier, or 2020.

The existing timetable from Danbury to South Norwalk requires 48-54 minutes. With the No Build and TSM alternatives, this travel time would increase over time to 62 minutes. Alternative C, full electrification, could cut Branch travel time by 20 minutes. The track and bridge upgrades with diesel equipment would cut travel time by an estimated five minutes compared to the current schedule. Partial electrification (Alt. E) would reduce trip times by three minutes.

In response to a couple of questions, Gazillo noted that the new Georgetown station is the only assumed new station in the study south of Danbury. Three new stations north of Danbury would be added if service is extended to New Milford. Andy Davis added that the recently announced market study by the Housatonic Railroad concerning passenger service to Pittsfield seems likely to be focusing on a scenic excursion type of service since the allowable track speeds under current conditions would not allow for a regularly scheduled passenger train. Gazillo also mentioned that Massachusetts has shown very limited interest to date in funding any passenger service to Pittsfield.

In view of the ongoing budgetary problems of the State, Gail Lavielle suggested marketing the proposed improvements by highlighting the benefits to local business that an expansion of service could bring, as well as the benefit of unclogging parking facilities on the main line and enhancing mobility for seniors and mobility-impaired riders. Gazillo said that these factors will be included in the cost: benefit analysis of the EIS.

Alternative 3 without electrification is being costed out and evaluated for ridership levels to see if this alternative makes sense. Gazillo also mentioned that there has been no negative public comment received to date concerning the visual impacts of the catenary wires which provide power for the electric trains. However, the Housatonic Railroad is not enthusiastic about having electrification extend to New Milford due to the clearance issues related to double stack freight trains. Regarding an extension of the CTC system to New Milford, Gazillo said that this can easily be done if necessary.

Chairman Maloney expressed frustration about the length of time it takes to get the new service on line – 10 years. Andy Davis said that a lot of this time involves lining up the funding, especially if the electrification option, which involves significant capital costs, is selected. Other improvements, including more parking and station upgrades, can be done much more quickly. Steve Gazillo mentioned that if a design/build project format is used, this can shave as much as 30-40% off the project schedule, but this option requires specific legislative approval.

Gazillo lastly mentioned that the next meeting of the Danbury Branch Advisory Committee will likely be early this fall.

Reports from Operating Entities

Fred Riese mentioned that Mort Katz had received the 2010 Hartford County Bar Association *Pro Bono* Award. Fred also related that the Department of Economic and Community Development has released its Record of Decision on the proposed Waterbury Transportation Center. The Record of Decision (ROD) concluded that all impacts arising from the construction and operation of the Waterbury Transportation Center (WTC) and the shift of the pulse point for the local Waterbury fixed route bus system from the Green to the WTC site could be mitigated. The source of the funding for the mitigation, including eleven additional buses and a 30% increase in the operating budget of the system, has not yet been identified. The ROD proposes implementing the improvements in four phases. Phase I would involve short-term improvements to the existing system such as better bus shelters. Phase II would be preliminary preparations at the WTC site such as the demolition of the abandoned building there and improvements to the train station. Phase 3 would be the construction of an interim intermodal facility to support the rail service. Phase 4 would be the full build-out of the WTC. No funding is in place for any of these phases at the moment.

Russ St. John said that the Providence and Worcester is moving forward with its plans to upgrade the Willimantic Branch to give the railroad “a better window on the world”. P&W is very diligently pursuing federal funding to assist in this effort.

Rich Sunderhauf said that current labor contract between the ATU and HNS Management expired on June 30 but the sides have agreed to continue talks. The divide between the sides is very big.

Rich pointed out that the May issue of CT TRANSIT CONNECTIONS contains an article on accidents involving left hand turns and pedestrians. There is both a nationwide and a local trend for increases in such accidents, as highlighted at the Commission’s March 24 public hearing in New Haven.

Rich reported that a decision has been made to brand all the new 45-foot coaches, including those operated by DATTCO and Northeast Transportation, with the Connecticut Transit logo. This will result in even more situations where CT Transit gets the calls and complaints regarding these other buses even though the buses are operated by other systems.

The first of the new 60-foot articulated buses will be delivered this fall. Rich noted that they require 2-3 times as much curb space as traditional 40-foot buses. Therefore, in advance of their arrival, many downtown Hartford bus stops are being realigned or consolidated.

Chairman's Report

Chairman Maloney noted reading in a recent business article that Providence and Worcester's revenues were up 25% in the first quarter, which is a very good sign in this economy. He also noted with regret the resignation of ConnDOT Commissioner Joe Marie.

Old Business

Rick Schreiner distributed copies of a white paper he wrote in preparation for the Commission's legislative briefing, now planned for September. Rick's draft paper outlines who the Commission is, what it does, and what the prominent topics were during the spring public hearings. Chairman Maloney asked members to read it and come prepared with comments at the August meeting.

Chairman Maloney announced the fall public hearing schedule and assigned moderators for those hearings. Fred will moderate the Waterbury public hearing on September 7. The Newington hearing on September 29 will be moderated by Alan Sylvestre. On October 5 the Commission will be in Stamford and Gail Laviellee will officiate at that hearing. Finally, Kevin Maloney will do the honors at the New London public hearing on October 20.

Fred Riese displayed the plaque he received at the June 23 annual dinner of the Connecticut Association for Community Transportation where he was one of four recipients of the 2010 Friends of Public Transportation Award. He thanked Rick Schreiner for nominating him for the award.

New Business

Gail Lavielle confirmed that work is underway on the restoration of Wilton Station. The first selectman is very happy to see this progress. ConnDOT's schedule calls for the station to reopen in October. Gail expressed that she is pleased to see this project actively underway whether the October deadline ends up being achieved or not.

Fred announced that he is hoping to line up speakers on the Stamford Transportation Center parking issues and the New London Regional Intermodal Transit Center study for upcoming meetings.

Chairman Maloney adjourned the meeting at 3:13 PM.