

Connecticut Public Transportation Commission
Minutes of March 4, 2010

Fourth Floor Conference Room
Union Station, New Haven

Attendance: Members: Kevin Maloney, Richard Carpenter, Richard Schreiner, Richard Sunderhauf, Gail Lavielle, Bill Kelaher, Alan Sylvestre, Yvonne Loteczka, Mort Katz, Russ St. John, Ed McAnaney. **Ex-officio members:** Fred Riese (DEP). **ConnDOT staff:** Jim Redeker, Michael Sanders, Dennis King. **Guests:** Terry Hall, Jean Stimolo, Brooke Hoberman, James Rode.

Chairman Maloney called the meeting to order at 1:32 pm. The minutes of the meeting of February 4 were approved as written.

Featured Speaker

Bureau Chief Jim Redeker welcomed the Commission to New Haven. He noted that he has been in his position just a year now and that he had addressed the Commission at its March meeting one year ago. He felt it is an appropriate time to present an update on the New Britain Busway project as that effort is progressing rapidly and is at a critical point in its development with project design being at the 90% stage, the first cut of the full funding agreement having been submitted to the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), and \$45,000,000 in funding for the project having been included in the President's budget. Having set the table as to where the project currently stands, Redeker turned the floor over to Transit Administrator Mike Sanders to fill in the details.

The New Britain Busway proposal arose from the Hartford West Corridor Study done in 1999. At that time, the design year for evaluating improvements in the corridor was 2020. The highest trip diversion rate of all the options evaluated in the study was generated by the busway. The Corridor Study also evaluated commuter and light rail transit in the busway corridor and in the I-84 median, as well as an HOV lane option.

Sanders related that the busway will incorporate ITS features such as screens showing next bus arrival time, signal preference for the buses, closed circuit TV at stations, and automatic vehicle location via GPS.

A new service plan has been developed for the busway which has increased the projected ridership and hours of travel time savings. The service plan contemplates six minute headways along the busway and 12 minute headways for the through buses to Bristol. Four classes of bus service will run on the busway:

- Shuttle routes. These are the buses that run exclusively on the busway.
- Collector routes. These buses use the busway for a portion of their routes. Two collector routes mentioned were a Hartford-Elmwood-West Farms Mall-CCSU-downtown New Britain route and a Hartford-Elmwood-Farmington UConn route.

- Express routes. These routes will experience the biggest travel time savings from the busway. Express buses from Bristol, Waterbury and other points beyond New Britain will access the busway in New Britain to complete the latter portions of their trips.
- Feeder routes. Four feeder routes are contemplated to deliver riders to the busway to access connecting service. These four routes are: A) the Hospital Connector linking St. Francis Hospital, Asylum Hill and Hartford Hospital, B) the CCSU Connector servicing the East Street and Cedar Street busway stations and then continues on to the CCSU campus, C) the Newington Circulator linking Newington Junction and Newington Center, and D) the West Hartford Circulator linking West Hartford Center and Bishops Corner to the busway.

The bus stations along the busway will be standardized in design, parts and appearance, both to develop the busway brand and to simplify maintenance. ConnDOT has been working with the neighborhoods to design the routes serving each station. On average, the various busway design elements are at the 90% stage. Seventeen of the necessary nineteen total property takings have been accomplished, though many partial property takes remain to be completed. None of these are seen as potential causes of delay for the project.

Administratively, the annual New Starts proposal was submitted to FTA in September. The initial full funding agreement application was submitted in December. FTA accepted four new projects nationwide into the New Starts program for FY 2011 and the busway was one of these four. According to the General Accounting Office, the typical New Starts project takes 14 years to progress from concept to operation. The busway proposal, conceived in 1999, is right on schedule, with service implementation expected in 2013. In fact, some early utility relocation work for the project will commence this spring. Sanders noted that total construction costs for the busway are estimated at \$293 million out of the total project cost of \$573 million.

One of the other components of the project cost is the rolling stock. ConnDOT will order 17 articulated, low floor buses for the busway along with twelve other buses in the 30-foot and 40-foot classes. These will all be branded in appearance to identify them as Busway vehicles but that won't preclude them from being used elsewhere if necessary. These buses will be ordered in 2011 for delivery in 2013.

On a related note, Sanders said that ConnDOT's overall bus fleet will consist of 30% hybrid buses by the time the current round of procurements is complete. Hybrid buses cost much more than conventional diesel buses but are very reliable and are cheaper to operate because of their improved fuel economy.

In response to a question concerning fare levels for the busway, Sanders said the existing Connecticut Transit fare structure would be used for both the local bus services and the express bus routes using the busway. He also mentioned that Amtrak and the Federal Railroad Administration have signed off on modeling that shows that a 68-train per day schedule could run on a double-tracked section of the Springfield Line where the busway will be running parallel to Amtrak, and therefore the busway design, which fully accommodates two tracks and electrification on the Springfield Line, is compatible with any projected train operations in the corridor.

Despite the FRA/ Amtrak acceptance of the design compatibility, there is still the matter of property easements to be negotiated with Amtrak for use of a portion of their corridor for the busway. Work on these agreements has begun. On another rail-related question, Sanders was asked if he knew what vertical clearance would be provided under the Flatbush Avenue overpass. He was not sure though he thought it would be 21 feet.

Sanders noted that CCSU has plans to develop an East Campus on Cedar Street that will include dormitories. CCSU has some funding in place for this project. The university plans to build a busway station and to provide 250 parking spaces there for busway commuters as part of their plans for East Campus.

Cars are commonly stopped on the tracks on Flatbush Avenue waiting for the light, despite the use of that corridor by Amtrak passenger trains. Therefore, Sanders feels that the Flatbush Avenue flyover is imperative from a safety perspective to remove the threat of car/train collisions, a threat that exists even in the absence of the busway.

Jim Redeker pointed out that ConnDOT has not had the resources to do a big lobbying and publicity campaign for the busway as is often done for new projects of this scale and magnitude. The project has only been able to take advantage of free media publicity such as at the public hearings or at key progress points.

Regarding the lukewarm project support from those who prefer a rail option that would serve Bristol, Sanders noted that the existing express bus service from Bristol already attracts 170 people per day, and this is without having adequate parking in Bristol. With a travel time savings on the busway and improved parking, these numbers are bound to increase. How much additional ridership could a rail link to Bristol draw that would justify its expense?

ConnDOT expects to hear from FTA by late May or early June on the full funding agreement for the busway. Though the initial submissions were made to FTA in December, the final submittals are due next week.

The busway construction will be bid in five separate contracts to keep each one manageable in scope and to broaden the pool of firms who may be able to handle the individual projects.

Comments from the Public

Terry Hall mentioned that the recent stimulus funding for the Springfield Line will only cover double-tracking from Hartford to Newington Junction. Funding will yet be needed for the double-tracking north of Hartford and between Newington Junction and Meriden. Terry also said that construction work on the new Niantic River Amtrak bridge will begin next month.

Reports from Operating Entities

Russ St. John distributed an article from Progressive Railway magazine which spoke of the planning for a new passenger rail service linking Kenosha, Racine and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A new Southeastern Regional Transit Authority is proposed to advance this

proposal. Russ sees evidence of much more cooperation among the governmental and other entities in this proposal than he believes typically exists for transit projects in Connecticut.

Fred Riese mentioned that, apparently in response to ConnDOT's TIGER grant application for the Valley Railroad, both ConnDOT and DEP have received Freedom of Information requests from the Haddam Bulletin concerning documents from 1964 to the present relating to the Valley Railroad corridor acquisition and operation.

Rich Sunderhauf noted that the schedule and service changes he outlined last month for the Hartford Division of Connecticut Transit go into effect this Sunday.

Bill Kelaher attended a meeting of union service reps from all over the country held in Connecticut last week. He heard tales of woe concerning service cuts, fare increases and wage freezes from all over the country. New York's MTA is looking at a deficit of \$400-600 million this year.

Rich Schreiner announced that the HART bus service plan has been completed. A new service plan is prepared every five years to assess and improve the efficiency of the route structure. Rick also mentioned that the next meeting of the Danbury Branch Rail Study will be March 17 at Ridgefield Town Hall.

Brooke Hoberman of Rideworks distributed the new Shore Line East schedules which went into effect on January 18 and the Shore Line East schedule supplements for the service to New London, effective February 16. She also mentioned that NuRide will be sponsoring the third annual Earth Day Commuter Challenge, with \$100 Peapod gift certificates from Stop and Shop as prizes. Anyone who takes a bus, train, carpool or vanpool to work or who walks, bikes or telecommutes to his or her job is eligible to participate.

Jean Stimolo of Rideworks mentioned that work is underway on the new Shore Line East Branford station. The construction activities are taking up some of the parking capacity at present but ultimately the parking capacity will be increased from 200 spaces to 500.

Gail Lavielle attended a meeting of the Route 7 Corridor Land Use Study. Since much of the land along Route 7 is in two acre zoning, opportunities for cluster development, including commercial or residential uses at higher densities, are limited. Thus far, the study seems to be focusing on the clustering of development around the train stations of the Danbury Branch.

Chairman's Report

Chairman Maloney attempted to call the non-attending members on the Commission's roster to ascertain their future intent. He was able to reach Bob Zarnetske, who expressed a desire to become active on the Commission again, but who had submitted a letter of resignation to Governor Rell. Dennis King indicated that Zarnetske would need to contact the Governor's office about rescinding his resignation. Kevin was unable to reach John Zelinsky or Jack Testani but left messages for each of them putting the responsibility on them to contact him if they wished to continue on the Commission.

Kevin also talked to former chairman Tom Cheeseman and reported that Tom was feeling much better.

Lastly, Kevin did receive a call from Commissioner Marie. Kevin said they had a very productive discussion and that the Commissioner expressed his willingness to attend a future Commission meeting. In fact, Commissioner Marie offered to attend today's meeting but Kevin suggested that the April 1 meeting in Hartford would be more convenient, and Commissioner Marie accepted that invitation.

Old Business

None.

New Business

Dick Carpenter recommended that the Commission sit down with the Transportation Committee to discuss issues and priorities. Kevin thought that idea had much merit and was also interested in meeting with the staff of Congressman Larson or other members of the Connecticut delegation. One item of interest to Kevin in such a meeting would be to identify and discuss the number of steps and bottlenecks in project development that leads to such lengthy gestation periods before projects can become reality.

Alan Sylvestre made a motion that the Commission write a letter of endorsement of the New Britain Busway project to Commissioner Marie. Richard Sunderhauf seconded the motion. Dick Carpenter said he would support such an endorsement provided it contains language that the busway project not preclude future rail transit options in the corridor. No vote was taken on the motion since the actual language of the letter was not available for review by members. However, Kevin said he will get a draft to members by e-mail for review before the April meeting.

Ed McAnaney said that work is continuing on the development of a mission statement for the Commission.

Moderators for the four spring public hearings were named. Rick Schreiner will moderate the Bridgeport public hearing on March 16. Fred Riese will preside at the New Haven hearing on March 24. Gail Lavielle will handle moderator duties in Danbury on April 20. Lastly, Alan Sylvestre will run the April 27 hearing in New Britain.

At Gail's suggestion, it was decided to prepare a press release to announce the Commission's endorsement of the busway to follow the letter of support from the Commission.

Chairman Maloney adjourned the meeting at 3:48 PM.