

Connecticut Public Transportation Commission
Minutes of May 6, 2010

Fourth Floor Conference Room
Union Station, New Haven

Attendance: Members: Kevin Maloney, Richard Carpenter, Richard Schreiner, Richard Sunderhauf, Gail Lavielle, Alan Sylvestre, Yvonne Loteczka, Mort Katz, Russ St. John, Ed McAnaney, John Zelinsky. **Ex-officio members:** Fred Riese (DEP). **ConnDOT staff:** Dennis King. **Guests:** Terry Hall, Brooke Hoberman, David Lee, Mary Johnson, Dorothy Johnson.

Chairman Maloney called the meeting to order at 1:31 pm. The minutes of the meeting of April 1 were approved as written.

Featured Speaker

Chairman Maloney introduced David Lee, General Manager of Connecticut Transit and noted that he was invited to speak at today's meeting as a result of testimony at the Commission's March 24 public hearing in New Haven. Mr. Lee first noted that Connecticut Transit's new bus facility in New Haven will be opening this summer and he offered the Commission the opportunity to tour the facility and to use it to host a monthly meeting there.

Mr. Lee explained that Connecticut Transit consists of eight State-owned operating divisions. He is the general manager for the Hartford, New Haven and Stamford Divisions. Connecticut Transit is a private firm under contract to ConnDOT. The remaining five divisions of Connecticut Transit, operated by other entities, are the New Britain, Bristol, Waterbury, Meriden and Wallingford Divisions.

Lee mentioned that the three topics he had been requested to address today are (1) the recruiting and selection of bus drivers, (2) driver training, both for new drivers and in-service training, and (3) accident investigation.

Regarding the selection and training of drivers, Lee said a prospective driver must have a perfect driving record, must pass security, drug, alcohol and physical tests, and preferably already possess a commercial driver's license (CDL). The nature of the job of driving a bus is that the challenges and rewards come not so much from the driving of the bus as from dealing with people. Bus drivers must not only drive the route but must answer questions and be reliable, punctual and safety conscious. Connecticut Transit is perceived to be a good employer and, thus, it gets the cream of the crop for its drivers. The 550 driver positions in Connecticut Transit experience very low turnover, typically 5-8% of the workforce each year. For comparison sake, school bus driver positions experience 105% turnover annually.

New drivers undergo a 5-week training course which includes wheelchair training, learning the routes and schedules, learning company policies, and completing customer service training. Lee stressed the importance of driver training since the drivers are ambassadors for Connecticut Transit and represent the face of the company to the public.

Not only do drivers undergo initial training, but they also receive in-service training during their careers. Lee highlighted four specific examples of in-service training for drivers.

- Transit Ambassador training. This program, which began in Canada, is a required course which deals with customer relations and problem solving. It consists of three 8-hour days of training offered after a driver has at least one year of experience driving for the company.
- Defensive Driver Course. Typically drivers need this training after about three years of driving. At that point, they have either had their first accident or they may become complacent or over-confident about their driving ability.
- Smart Driver Training. This course looks at driver behavior as it relates to fuel use. It covers such areas as quick starts and stops, wear and tear on the vehicle, and providing a smoother ride for passengers.
- Special training in response to issues. Examples of such training offered in the last couple of years include proper procedures to board and secure mobility devices and pedestrian safety training which provided a refresher course in how to scan in all directions, look at the most likely places for pedestrians to appear, and looking for pedestrians to dart out.

Regarding the procedure for investigating accidents involving buses, Lee first noted that in the first ten months of fiscal year 2010, the company experienced 20% fewer accidents and 23% fewer preventable accidents than in the same period of FY 2009. Every accident in the system is evaluated, and the company uses a very inclusive definition of what is considered to be an accident. All contact involving a bus is considered an accident, even if no damage or injury results. The evaluation includes determining if each accident was preventable. For this purpose, the company uses the National Safety Council guidelines. Lee pointed out that a Connecticut Transit driver may be cited for a preventable accident even if the other motorist receives a ticket. For instance, if another motorist runs a red light and collides with a bus, the bus driver could still be cited by the company if he or she should have seen or anticipated the other vehicle's path in the judgment of the accident evaluation team.

A review team is constituted for the more serious accidents. Progressive discipline for preventable accidents is based on the seriousness of the accident and the driving record of the driver. A lot of small accidents can be a good indicator of the potential for a serious accident. Lee mentioned that all buses have both interior and exterior surveillance cameras which can assist in accident investigation.

Lee made several points concerning the relationship of Connecticut Transit to other transit systems operating in Connecticut. Connecticut Transit is the "800 pound gorilla in the room." It operates 411 buses. All other systems in Connecticut have maybe 200 buses combined. There is much sharing of information and other coordination between Connecticut Transit and other systems, particularly on matters of maintenance, training, fuel procurement and bus procurement. Other efforts at coordination between systems involve trying to make the fare collection systems more uniform and making the appearance of all the buses more similar across the state.

In response to a question about Connecticut Transit's fuel cell bus and about the use of GPS, Lee said Connecticut Transit does not at present have GPS equipment on its buses, though they wish they were thus equipped. Connecticut Transit will soon be issuing an RFP for a new radio system which will include automatic vehicle locator technology. Concerning the fuel cell bus, it is best considered as a 'rolling laboratory'. The bus had been hampered by problems with its batteries but it has been improving over time resulting in less downtime. Four more fuel cell buses will be added to the Connecticut Transit fleet next year.

Another question for Lee concerned the use of automated announcement systems to announce approaching stops on Connecticut Transit buses, similar to the systems in use on Washington, DC's Metro system. Lee said that the Norwalk Transit District has an automated announcement system, which is very expensive, at approximately \$9,000 per bus. On other systems, including Connecticut Transit, stops are announced manually. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, certain bus stops, time points and transfer points must be announced. Compliance with this requirement for Connecticut Transit is monitored by secret bus riders. Monitoring on its buses has found that compliance with announcing the stops is high but that the enunciation on the speakers is often poor.

Lee was asked whether Connecticut Transit limits hirings to only those drivers who currently possess commercial driver's licenses. He answered that only very seldom does Connecticut Transit hire drivers who do not hold CDLs. They are reluctant to hire such drivers because of the very long delays that can be involved in getting a CDL.

Regarding his thoughts concerning the proposed New Britain Busway, Lee said he believes it is a great idea and is one of the rare instances when ConnDOT selected a transit solution to a highway problem. If the busway proposal is scrapped, it would take a long time to advance the proposal for train service in that corridor and on to Waterbury, and Connecticut would be required to repay the Federal dollars which have been committed to the busway project.

Lee would support a dedicated bus transfer hub in the downtown Hartford area if it is sited in the correct location which would work well operationally. Such a facility was proposed in the Northwest Corridor Study undertaken by the Capitol Region Council of Governments. It would require funding and political support to make such a facility a reality but it could offer more amenities for bus riders at a dedicated location.

The issue of the mirror placement location on buses and its effect on visibility had been raised as a possible contributing factor in two New Haven accidents involving Connecticut Transit buses. Mary Johnson of Coalition for People, New Haven suggested that changing the placement of the mirrors should be mandatory. David Lee said that results on changing the mirror location in New Haven and Hartford were inconclusive. That idea was tested and some drivers preferred the mirrors moved up, some preferred them down, and others said it made no difference. Lee referred to a Portland, Oregon study involving four bus accidents there. The study concluded that wherever the mirror is placed, it will block something from visibility. Therefore, the driver must move his/ her head to see what is behind the mirror. Lee said that the mirror placement is not inherently unsafe and that moving the mirror does not make the bus

inherently safer. To put these accidents in perspective, he noted that Connecticut Transit carries 25,000,000 passengers per year and its buses log millions of miles annually.

A final question to Lee concerned whether a separate maintenance facility will be constructed in Hartford for the new fuel cell buses. Lee said a free-standing structure will be built on the east side of the existing Hartford Division yard to handle the fuel cell buses.

Comments from the Public

Terry Hall reported on some Amtrak news he had gathered during a just-completed trip to Washington. In Amtrak's planning to address operating time improvements on the Northeast Corridor, the railroad has some good ideas for how to improve Washington to NYC times but it will be much more difficult to shave time north of New York. Although there is little in Amtrak's plan to address the northern end of the Northeast Corridor, he hears more talk now of using the Inland Route from New Haven to Boston via Springfield to get Amtrak trains off the curvy coastal section of the Northeast Corridor onto the much straighter tracks of the Springfield Line and the Boston and Albany Mainline. This would also eliminate the issue of the five moveable bridges east of New Haven. Terry believes this is the rationale for the push to make the Springfield Line a high speed line.

Terry also provided status reports on several Amtrak bridge projects in eastern Connecticut. Amtrak is working on two bridge projects in Stonington, with one being close to completion if not already completed and the other under construction. The Thames River Bridge is being sandblasted now in preparation for repainting. At the Niantic River Bridge, fill is being placed for the new track alignment which will be just south of the existing tracks. The new bridge pier and abutments are being constructed, and the existing pedestrian walkway along the bay is being removed. Terry predicted that this would be a summer of construction delays along this corridor.

Brooke Hoberman mentioned that some minor changes to the Shore Line East schedule go into effect Monday with trains being added originating in New London to New Haven and some slight alternations in the New Haven to Old Saybrook schedule.

Reports from Operating Entities

Rick Schreiner mentioned that the Jobs Access and Reverse Commute program funds for next year could potentially be reduced by 8%. The DSS funds that support a significant portion of the Jobs Access services are in the budget at the moment but their status is uncertain.

Rick also attended the third Collaborative Transportation Planning Program, held May 3 in Stamford, to discuss cross border transportation planning issues and coordination. ConnDOT Bureau Chief Jim Redeker was the keynote speaker and discussed cross-border planning between New York and New Jersey based on his 30 years of experience at New Jersey Transit. He also contrasted New Jersey and Connecticut operational structures and issues.

Richard Sunderhauf mentioned that Connecticut Transit will be removing all pay phones from its properties as a cost-saving measure because they are now being charged for phone maintenance after call volumes fell below a certain minimum threshold.

Chairman's Report

Chairman Maloney reported that the Commission's letter to Commissioner Marie in support of the New Britain Busway had gone out. Kevin also read from an article in the February 19 CT Mirror that, of the \$1,486,000,000 in total receipts collected from the state fuel tax between FY 2006 and 2010, \$606,000,000 had gone into transportation, while \$880,000,000 went to the General Fund.

Lastly, Kevin noted that the Commission had an excellent public hearing in Danbury with a very good turnout and some good testimony, but that the New Britain public hearing was "less than excellent" as in fact no members of the general public turned out for that hearing.

Old Business

Ed McAnaney distributed copies of the draft mission statement for the Commission as developed by a subcommittee he headed. Very minor changes to the draft statement were made. The statement was adopted with these minor changes. It reads as follows:

A robust, balanced transportation system is necessary for a vibrant economy and a favorable quality of life. In pursuit of these goals, the Connecticut Public Transportation Commission advises the Governor, the Transportation Committee of the General Assembly and the Commissioner of Transportation on the development and maintenance of a multimodal public transportation system that offers an attractive alternative to private motor vehicles for commuting, leisure, business travel and the movement of freight into and around the state of Connecticut.

The Commission develops its independent perspective through the expertise of its members and the solicitation of public comment at its regular meetings and its annual series of public hearings across the state. In its efforts to improve the utility, convenience, comfort and safety of Connecticut's transportation system, the Commission performs its statutory role through the development of the recommendations contained in its annual report and through other timely recommendations as matters of interest arise.

New Business

Gail Lavielle reminded members that the legislative briefing that the Commission originally planned to conduct in February was rescheduled to May and it is now May. Gail outlined the purposes of the briefing as:

- To present our revamped role and our new leadership.
- To publicize the Commission.
- To discuss issues raised at our spring public hearings.
- To announce the schedule for the fall public hearings.

It was agreed to look for a date in June for the briefing and to nail down the final details at the Commission's June 3 meeting. Toward this end, a working group meeting will be held before June 3 to further plan the briefing.

Chairman Maloney also will call Commissioner Marie to see if he will appear at the June 3 meeting, redeeming his rain check for his scheduled appearance at the April 1 meeting. Kevin also will contact the appointing authorities for two Commission vacancies, those of Jack Testani and Robert Zarnetske, to pursue the refilling of those positions.

Fred Riese mentioned that DEP has received a scoping notice announcing that ConnDOT intend to initiate an environmental impact evaluation for a proposed commuter railroad station in Orange at the site previously considered before the West Haven location was selected for a new station. Fred assumed that the additional parking capacity that could be provided at this site, up to 1,100 spaces, was the rationale for pushing the development of this site. Fred also mentioned that in checking with Brenda Janotta of ConnDOT about the status of the development of the State Rail Plan, she told him she had been temporarily assigned to work on agreements to implement a \$2 million stimulus grant which Amtrak had received to make security improvements at Union Station.

John Zelinsky, who had arrived after the April minutes were adopted, noted that his name had been misspelled as Zelinski in those minutes. Similarly, Gail Lavielle noted that she had been given an estimate of 17-18 trains per day on an upgraded Danbury Branch as a likely level of service. The minutes had given a figure of 18-20 trains per day.

Chairman Maloney summarized the long discussion about publicity measures for the Commission's public hearings that took place at New Britain City Hall on April 27 when no members of the public attended that hearing. Kevin felt that the successful measures employed for the Danbury public hearing should serve as the template for future hearings. This would include having the moderator for each hearing contact the regional planning agency, the transit district, and local officials in advance of each hearing. The Commission will also write up press releases in advance of each hearing. Further discussion of these measures will be undertaken at the Commission's June meeting. Alan Sylvestre agreed with these measures but noted that it is the nature of public hearings that sometimes no members of the public attend them.

Chairman Maloney adjourned the meeting at 3:38 PM.