

Connecticut Public Transportation Commission
Minutes of September 2, 2010

Legislative Office Building, Hearing Room 1A
Hartford, Connecticut

Attendance: Members: Richard Schreiner, Richard Sunderhauf, Gail Lavielle, Yvonne Loteczka, Mort Katz, Russ St. John, Chris Adams, Robert Rodman. **Ex-officio members:** Susan Simmat (OPM), Fred Riese (DEP). **ConnDOT staff:** James Peay, Sherry Osterling. **Guests:** James Butler, Terry Hall, Jan Lindberg, Mary Reid, Meghan Cowell.

Vice chairman Richard Schreiner called the meeting to order at 1:41 pm. He welcomed new member Robert Rodman of Avon and welcomed Susan Simmat back to the Commission after a long absence. The minutes of the meeting of August 5 were adopted as written.

Featured Speaker

James Butler, executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments, gave a detailed presentation on the Council-sponsored study of a Regional Intermodal Transportation Center (RITC) in downtown New London. The study began in July 2008 and was undertaken with a grant of \$750,000 from ConnDOT. The goal of the study was to design a seamless downtown intermodal hub which supports both transportation and economic revitalization. Although the idea for such a facility has been discussed for many years, the desire to find an alternate location for the occasional cruise ships visiting New London, which have been using State Pier to berth, was the issue that crystallized the current study effort. To that end, ConnDOT requested that the study also include an alternatives analysis which analyzed the Fort Trumbull area south of downtown as a possible site for an intermodal hub, in addition to evaluating the downtown site. Ultimately, however, it was the unanimous decision of the study committee to pursue the downtown site for further evaluation.

The study effort began with a series of surveys on the travel needs of residents and visitors. These surveys indentified the most important links desired by transit users between modes. Transportation modes available at or near the intermodal study area, which is centered at the historic H. H. Richardson-designed Union Station constructed in 1888, include Amtrak intercity rail, Shore Line East commuter rail, Greyhound intercity bus, Cross Sound Ferry to Long Island, Block Island Ferry, Fishers Island Ferry, SEAT bus service, casino shuttle coaches, taxis, and auto passenger drop-offs and pick-ups. The City-owned Water Street parking garage located across the street from the train station and ferry access points is also a key element of the intermodal center proposal. A proposed increase in the number of Shore Line East trains serving New London will increase the demand for better travel connections in downtown New London. To date, there has been little cooperation and coordination among the many transit services located in the study area.

The study also looked at the need for improved wayfinding signage, particularly from the parking garage to the Block Island and Orient Point ferry services. Butler mentioned that the

design year for the study is 2030. The City's parking garage is 25-30 years old and has a design life of 50 years.

Both immediate (1-2 year) and short term (3+ years) improvements that could be done to enhance access to and coordination between various transit services were evaluated. ConnDOT has expressed a willingness to be involved in the improvements but wants to see an "up and over" pedestrian bridge constructed across the railroad tracks before it becomes involved. The immediate improvements are items that can be done without any relocation of Water Street, whereas the short range improvements will require a minor realignment of that street. The pedestrian bridge would be part of the short term improvements, along with wayfinding improvements, rail station improvements, a combined bus terminal, and a taxi pick-up and drop-off station.

Several options for a pedestrian bridge were considered. It could be integrated into the bus terminal building or even extend to the Cross Sound Ferry terminal. On the western end, it could begin in the Water Street garage or from the sidewalk level. Other pedestrian improvements are needed in the ferry terminal parking lots and along Water Street. The City has installed new poles or posts along Water Street to replace a cyclone fence which was in disrepair. Wayfinding improvements are now underway.

New London's Union Station is privately-owned. In fact, it is the only privately-owned station on the entire Northeast Corridor. Butler spoke of the need to find new tenants for the railroad station. It has too much vacant space that is not producing revenue. Transportation-related businesses are preferred but ultimately tenants of other natures may be needed.

No major improvements are needed for Amtrak's service but Shore Line East trains will, at Amtrak's request, be moving to Track 6, the freight track. ConnDOT will make short term modifications to the northbound platform to allow access to Track 6.

For bus operations, the study proposes a new terminal building east of Water Street to provide expanded capacity for buses and an enclosed waiting room for passengers. Water Street would need to be relocated to provide more space for the terminal. The terminal design contemplates three bays for Greyhound and 8 bays for SEAT.

Under existing conditions, auto passenger drop-off and pick-up functions occur in a very confined space in front of Union Station and most often compete with taxis for this space. The study proposes a pick-up and short-term parking area be added in front of the Water Street garage to accommodate these functions and also that a *Zipcar* outlet be located in the garage. A car rental outlet at Union Station is also proposed. The addition of a taxi pick-up and drop-off area in front of Union Station is also proposed as are bicycle racks and perhaps even a bicycle rental outlet.

The need for an "up and over" crossing of the train tracks to access the intermodal center has been somewhat controversial because of its potential to block views of the Thames River from The Parade and downtown. An open design with glass sides and a steel frame has been proposed to minimize visual impacts.

Regarding coordination between the various transit service operators, Butler spoke of instituting an RITC Coordinating Council, possibly chaired by ConnDOT, for both governance and coordination roles. He also raised the possibility of a State role in the ownership of the Water Street garage.

Costs for the proposed improvements are estimated at \$5.5 million for the immediate term measures and \$17.7 million for the short-term improvements, including the full pedestrian bridge. The latter cost figure would drop to \$10 million with a partial pedestrian bridge spanning only the railroad tracks.

In addition, the study team looked at what would constitute a bare-bones alternative, costing \$3.0 million. This would not involve relocating Water Street, building a pedestrian bridge, or moving the bus terminal. It would renovate existing buildings and provide an indoor waiting area, but would require the use of some private property. As ConnDOT has recently expressed more flexibility concerning the requirement for a pedestrian bridge across the tracks, additional options may now be on the table for consideration.

In response to a question on the projection for additional residential development occurring in downtown New London, Butler said a new 6-story residential condominium building has just opened downtown. Other residential units along State Street and Bank Street above commercial and office space are currently being developed. So we are already seeing some residential development. He also cited the potential for casino traffic from New York and Long Island to benefit and increase with better intermodal connections at New London.

In regard to progress on setting up the RITC Coordination Council, Butler said no one objected to this concept during the study meetings. Butler would like to see ConnDOT chair this group and he hopes to see it get started by the end of this year.

Lastly, Butler answered another question about the Nathan Hale School by noting that the schoolhouse now has a permanent foundation in New London just north of the new Parade.

Comments from the Public

Terry Hall faulted having New London as the eastern terminus of Shore Line East service. For one thing, it creates a parking problem there. But he feels the key point is that it leaves a short gap between Wickford, RI and New London that prevents having continuous commuter rail operations on the northern end of the Northeast Corridor. On the southern half of the Northeast Corridor, commuter operations run continuously from Penn Station in NYC to northern Virginia. That should also be the case from NYC to Boston. At present, MBTA operations run as far south as T.F. Green Airport in Warwick, RI but a planned extension of service to Wickford will help close the unserved gap. If Shore Line East could extend service to Westerly, RI, and RIDOT could extend south to Westerly, the continuous commuter rail link between NYC and Boston would be accomplished. Westerly offers ample space for new tracks and an interchange point, which New London does not possess, and Westerly would be a significant passenger destination on its own because of its proximity to beaches. He cited that

only three Amtrak trains per day serve Mystic and sees this low level of service as a problem that commuter rail service would address.

In response to a question concerning progress on the replacement of Amtrak's Niantic River Bridge, Jan Lindberg reported that much work has been going on there. Currently, the Niantic River navigation channel is blocked from 11:00 pm to 4:00 am for work on the new bridge foundations but, come fall, there will be more extensive closures of the channel. Lindberg also endorsed running Budd car passenger service between New London and Worcester and making use of the New England Central rail line by Amtrak to serve the Mohegan Sun casino.

Reports from Operating Entities

Rich Sunderhauf reported that contract talks between the Amalgamated Transit Union and Connecticut Transit are still on-going, with both sides agreeing to a new deadline extension to September 30. A Federal mediator has been called in to facilitate the talks.

Russ St. John mentioned that he recently took a trip on the Quebec, North Shore and Labrador Railroad from Sept-Iles, Quebec on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River, northward through western Labrador and up to Schefferville, Quebec. Russ was extremely impressed with the railroad's modern equipment and the port facility at Sept-Iles, as well as with the high state of maintenance of the railroad. Fred Riese, who coincidentally also happened to be in Labrador City, Labrador last month, concurred in Russ's impression of the quality of the Quebec, North Shore and Labrador rolling stock and track condition that he observed in and around Labrador City where that railroad serves several large iron mines.

Chairman's Report

Vice chairman Richard Schreiner mentioned two articles forwarded to him by Chairman Maloney. The topics of those articles were the State's receipt of a \$14.7 million federal grant for bus projects in Hartford, New Britain, Newington and Bridgeport and the status of Bradley Airport as having the highest average ticket prices of any New England airport.

Old Business

Richard Schreiner circulated for comment the latest copy of the white paper he authored concerning the salient topics raised at the Commission's spring public hearings.

New Business

Copies of the draft meeting schedule for 2011 were distributed. A desire was expressed by several members to move a couple of the New Haven meetings in the second half of 2011 to Hartford area locations, either at the Legislative Office Building or at ConnDOT.

Fred Riese mentioned that an article in the Waterbury Republican concerning the new bus facility for the New Haven Division of Connecticut Transit mentioned a date of 2012 for the beginning of construction on the long-planned new bus garage for Waterbury (actually in Watertown) and progress on design work for bus storage and maintenance facilities in Willimantic and Torrington.

Russ St. John referred to the Commission's long-standing recommendation to ConnDOT to designate a cell phone parking lot at Bradley Field, an idea which has not been implemented by the department, and then noted seeing a sign along Route 75 for a free private cell phone lot near the airport.

Gail Lavielle mentioned that rehabilitation work on Wilton Station is proceeding on schedule for a planned reopening this fall.

Mary Reid of Rideworks distributed copies of the new Shore Line East schedule which went into effect on August 30.

Vice chairman Schreiner adjourned the meeting at 3:10 PM.