

Connecticut Public Transportation Commission
Minutes of March 6, 2014

Fourth Floor Conference Room
Union Station, New Haven

Attendance: Members: Alan Sylvestre, Yvonne Loteczka, Richard Sunderhauf, Mort Katz, Robert Rodman, Russ St. John, Ed McAnaney, Bill Kelaher, Chris Adams. **Ex-officio members:** David LeVasseur (OPM), Fred Riese (DEEP). **Guests:** Joseph Comerford (Estuary Transit District).

Administrative Vice Chairman Fred Riese called the meeting to order at 1:35 pm. He noted that Chairman Kevin Maloney was attending a Freedom of Information Commission hearing this afternoon in regard to a complaint filed against ConnDOT and the Commission in connection with the Commission's August 2013 meeting at ConnDOT.

The minutes of the meeting of February 6 were then approved as written.

Featured Speaker

Joseph Comerford, Executive Director of the Estuary Transit District, explained that the District serves the nine member towns of Old Saybrook, Old Lyme, Chester, Clinton, Deep River, Essex, Killingworth, Lyme and Westbrook, as well as providing transit service in Haddam and East Haddam under contract. The Estuary Transit District was founded in 1981. For the first twenty years, it did not provide much service and was, until fairly recently, largely serving a ridership base of senior citizens. However, the District has seen substantial growth in the last five years.

The Estuary Transit District (ETD) uses a fleet of 13 body-on-chassis vehicles to operate four routes. These are the Shoreline Shuttle from the Old Saybrook train station along Route 1 to Madison, the Riverside Shuttle from Old Saybrook to Chester Center, the Southeast Shuttle from Old Saybrook to Old Lyme and New London, and the Mid-Shore Express from Old Saybrook train station to the Middletown bus terminal. All of these routes are operated as deviated fixed routes to meet both fixed route needs and ADA requirements. The Old Saybrook train station is the hub of the ETD system.

The Shoreline Shuttle service began after CT Transit truncated a previous route from New Haven to Old Saybrook to terminate at Madison. This route, which is the most popular of ETD's four routes, connects to CT Transit at Madison. Due to the large number of transfers made there between the two systems, the buses are timed to meet in Madison and will even wait for each other if one is running late. Comerford said that most of the ETD riders making the transfer at Madison are not going to New Haven but rather to Guilford or Branford, though some do go to New Haven. Although the schedule of the Shoreline Shuttle is geared to accommodate westbound trips, Comerford noted that 51% of the total ridership on the route is eastbound and only 49% of the trips are westbound.

The Riverside Shuttle from Old Saybrook to Chester connects to Middletown Area Transit at Chester and the two systems accept each other's passes. The fare is \$1.50 on both systems. Middlesex Community College students make up a big block of the ridership on this route. ETD and CT Transit also connect in Middletown and honor each other's passes.

The Southeast Shuttle from Old Saybrook to New London connects to the SEAT system at the New London train station. SEAT accepts ETD transfers but not its passes.

In total, the District's routes serve five Shore Line East and two Amtrak stations.

Estuary Transit District, whose services operate under the name 9 Town Transit, operates its 13 body-on-chassis vehicles over 550,000 miles of revenue service per year. The District's budget is \$1.5 million. Last year the District carried over 100,000 passengers for the first time. This represented an 85% increase from the levels carried in 2009, just four years earlier. The base fare is \$1.50, with the fare for off-corridor and dial-a-ride services being \$3.00. The general public is eligible to use the dial-a-ride service.

Comerford noted that for a small system, the District does have advanced dispatching and routing software. Customers can get text messages for their vehicle's arrival. On-line booking of dial-a-ride trips or on-line cancellations or trip changes are offered. Hearing-impaired riders, in particular, appreciate these features.

Over 50% of the ridership on 9 Town Transit is for work trips. The Riverside Shuttle formerly ran from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm, hours not at all conducive for commuting use. ConnDOT provided funding to expand the service hours to 6:25 am to 8:00 pm on this route to enhance its value for commuters.

Four years ago, the District bought two hybrid small buses, the first of their kind in New England. The District now runs five hybrid vehicles. Fuel efficiency on the hybrid vehicles is 10-20% better than on the District's conventional vehicles.

In 2011, the Community Transportation Association of America selected the Estuary Transit District 9 Town Transit system as its Rural Transportation System of the Year. In winning this national honor, the District was chosen over approximately 4,000 other member systems.

Ridership on the Shoreline Shuttle, which reached 65,000 riders last year, is now at the point where vehicles are at or over capacity, with standing room only conditions common. Operation of this route as a deviated fixed route is also becoming difficult on a schedule basis if the bus is to meet its CT Transit connection in Madison. Some of the beachfront roads over which the vehicles must operate on off-corridor trips are sufficiently narrow and curvy to be a challenge for the District's drivers. Ideally, the District would like to divide this route into a straight fixed route service to handle the bulk of the ridership and a separate paratransit service. Comerford noted that on Saturdays, only the Shoreline Shuttle and the Riverside routes offer service. At some point, he would like to offer Saturday service on all the system's routes.

Two other expansions that the District would like to undertake are new service to connect to CT Transit's S Route and a new service to Middletown. This latter route would operate from Madison to Middletown along Routes 1 and 81. It would provide service to Middletown from the western end of the District, cutting the current travel time between these areas by as much as two hours. It would include a stop at Middlesex Community College, providing enhanced access to educational opportunities for residents of Madison, Clinton, Killingworth and Haddam. It would also provide a link between Middletown and New Haven.

The District is currently operating out of a leased facility in Old Saybrook. It must contract out all vehicle maintenance work and although its vendor garage does prioritize the District's needs, often there is still a wait for repairs. The current leased facility is shared with another tenant, does not have room for additional vehicles or longer vehicles, and has also gotten very cramped in terms of office space. The commercial garage that performs the District's maintenance work does not stock much inventory of parts for the District's vehicles which can be a further source of delay in getting repairs done. In addition, the leased vehicle storage facility does not offer fueling capacity so the District must buy its fuel at a retail gas station.

There are not many options for a newer or bigger facility for the District in Old Saybrook. The District has had early discussions with ConnDOT about this issue. ConnDOT will be seeking the necessary funding, about \$30,000, to do a site selection study as the first step in a process for a new vehicle storage and maintenance facility.

Comerford highlighted one of the issues of being reliant of a retail gas station for fuel. In some recent storms, much of Old Saybrook lost power. Fortunately, the power at their gas station stayed on but there was a run on fuel at their station as one of the few in town to be open. Fueling capacity could be kept on line if the District had its own facility.

In response to a question concerning its drivers, Comerford said the District employs 25 full-time and part-time drivers. Only six of these are full-time positions. These positions pay \$12.75 per hour to start but offer good benefits. The District has had no trouble filling the full-time positions but it has been difficult to fill the part-time ones. Comerford also noted that the District has a very good Board of Directors, namely the first selectmen of the member towns.

Fares represent 10% of the revenue for the District. The towns contribute 8% of the funding through their membership dues to the District. State and Federal funds make up the remaining 82% of the budget. Comerford observed that every route run by the District has a different funding mix.

In response to a question about the level of bicycle usage on ETD vehicles, Comerford said that statistics on this are not kept but that anecdotally there is a good level of bicycle usage, though it is seasonal.

Responding to a question as to whether the District offers discount fares to veterans, Comerford says it does not. As a rural transit district, it is not allowed to offer half rate fares unless the towns are willing to pay the difference in revenue. In many other systems, elderly and disabled riders qualify for half fares but rural districts cannot offer this. This does create

problems when riders transfer from connecting systems and have Connecticut half fare cards issued by CT Transit that state they are good for all transit systems in Connecticut receiving Federal funds. Further complicating this matter is that the Windham Region Transit District and Northwestern Connecticut Transit do offer half fares even though they are rural systems. They have some pre-standing approval to do this and thus are grandfathered.

Another question to Comerford concerned whether the District had experienced any problem with assaults on its drivers. Comerford said that a serious incident occurred about a year ago when a passenger tried to take control of a vehicle while it was on Interstate 95 and tried to take the vehicle into another lane. There was one other passenger on the bus at that time. With some difficulty, the driver was able to fight off the attacker and maintain control of the vehicle but he was injured in the process. Since this turned out to be a mental health issue, no charges were filed. Unlike most assault incidents on drivers, this one did not involve fare payment.

Lastly, Comerford explained that Haddam and East Haddam, which receive service from the District on a contract basis rather than as member towns, do not pay dues to the District but also do not have a vote in the operation of the District. East Haddam went the contract route because it was in a hurry to get service started and did not have time to undertake the membership process. In the case of Haddam, there was uncertainty as to how a motion for District membership would fare at a town meeting, so it was easier to get some service under contract. After the town has some experience with the District's service, it may decide to pursue membership.

Comments from the Public

None.

Reports from Operating Entities

Bill Kelaher reported that things are relatively quiet on the rail labor front at the moment. However, there is the potential for a strike on the Long Island Railroad this July if a new agreement is not reached by July 19. A strike on the LIRR could potentially also affect Amtrak services since the two railroads share access to Penn Station. Bill also noted that workers on Metro-North continue to work without a contract as the previous contract expired four years ago now.

Chairman's Report

Fred Riese read the Chairman's Report submitted to him by Chairman Maloney. Kevin apologized for his absence today, explaining that (as mentioned earlier) he was obligated to appear at a Freedom of Information Commission hearing regarding a complaint concerning access to the ConnDOT building and, as a result, to one of the Commission's meetings.

Chairman Maloney's report continued, noting that there appears to be a growing amount of dialogue among both the public and legislators about the viability of extending passenger service on the Housatonic Railroad's Berkshire Line. A petition containing 2,730 signatures supporting the extension was recently submitted to the Governor's office; however, the state representatives for the area appear to be cautious at best in their support for the project. Colin

Pease, who has provided us with timely updates on this effort, is quoted as saying that he is encouraged by the public support it is receiving.

There have been a number of recent articles, most notably in the Waterbury Republican, the Hartford Business Journal and newstimes.com, regarding the siphoning of funds from the Special Transportation Fund to the General Fund over the years by the Governor and Legislature, the lead issue in our 2013 annual report. Our report was specifically quoted in the Republican and the Journal articles. The recent travails of Metro-North perhaps have drawn attention to the inadequacy of the transportation funding. Some have questioned whether the State is contributing enough to adequately maintain its infrastructure. In any event, we were out in front of almost everyone else on this issue.

Lastly, the Obama administration announced that it was including a \$302 billion four year spending plan in its 2015 budget, emphasizing the federal government's responsibility for the maintenance of roads and bridges. They also said they would emphasize the TIGER grant program which they would fund to the extent of \$600 million this fiscal year.

Fred then read a recent e-mail from Commission member Dick Carpenter expressing his regards to the Commission and describing his continuing work on his railroad atlas and on rail-related blogs he is writing for the Johns Hopkins University Press.

Fred briefly reported on ConnDOT Commissioner Redeker's remarks at the February 20th CACT Legislative Breakfast at the State Capitol. Fred also noted that he had two recent opportunities to present the recommendations of the CPTC Annual Report, first on a radio interview on February 21, then at the February 26 quarterly meeting of the transit districts. As Chairman Maloney had mentioned, Fred noted several recent articles concerning the practice of using the Special Transportation Fund to balance the State budget and the movement to implement a constitutional amendment to prevent the continuation of this practice. Former Commission member and now State Representative Gail Lavielle is one of the leaders in this effort.

Lastly, Fred mentioned that on March 24 the Federal Railroad Administration will be hosting a meeting at the Lyceum in Hartford to present recent progress on the NEC Future study which is looking at identifying priority improvements for the Northeast Corridor, including potentially new alignments.

Old Business

None.

Discussion of 2014 Public Hearings

Fred presented the list of spring public hearing locations and dates. The three spring hearings will be Tuesday, May 6 in New Haven at the Hall of Records, Tuesday, May 13 in Stamford at the Government Center, and Monday, June 2 in Danbury at City Hall. Assignment of hearing moderators will be addressed at the Commission's April meeting.

New Business

None.

Fred closed the meeting at 3:07 pm.