

## Connecticut Public Transportation Commission

Minutes of May 1, 2014

Fourth Floor Conference Room

Union Station, New Haven

**Attendance: Members:** Kevin Maloney, Richard Schreiner, Alan Sylvestre, Robert Rodman, Russ St. John, Nick Lownes. **Ex-officio members:** David LeVasseur (OPM), Fred Riese (DEEP). **Guests:** Colin Pease, Rodney Chabot.

Chairman Maloney opened the meeting at 1:32 pm. Fred Riese noted that he had incorrectly reversed the undergraduate and graduate universities attended by new Commission member Dr. Nicholas Lownes. The April minutes should have said that Lownes did his undergraduate work at Iowa State and his graduate work at University of Texas at Austin. Subject to this change, the April minutes were accepted as written.

### **Featured Speaker**

Colin Pease, Vice President for Special Projects at the Housatonic Railroad began his presentation by providing some background on the proposal to operate passenger service over Housatonic's Berkshire Line and connecting to New York City via the Maybrook and Harlem Lines. About three and a half or four years ago, he and Housatonic president John Hanlon began to wonder if passenger service to New York would be a viable concept. They hired the firm of Market Street Research to develop the initial estimate of the ridership that the service might attract. Pease noted that most of the corridor is fairly sparsely populated. The initial estimate was that such a service would generate 2,000,000 one-way riders annually. Pease explained that the largest volume of riders would be from metro New York to the Litchfield Hills and Berkshires, resulting in the 2,000,000 rides. Approximately 1.5 million people visit this region today from New York City. The four major market groups generating these trips would be:

- daily and semi-daily commuters
- tourists to the Berkshires
- owners of second homes in Litchfield and Berkshire Counties
- students

Following the market study, an economic analysis was performed. Housatonic hired professor Stephen Shepard at Williams College to do that economic analysis. His study indicated that \$1 billion in direct economic activity would be generated over the first decade that the passenger service is in operation. This figure would not include indirect economic activity such as transit-oriented development.

Housatonic envisions running eight round trips per day to Pittsfield. If properly structured, Housatonic believes it could run this service with no operating subsidy. The service would, however, need a significant infusion of capital to upgrade the track and build stations. The estimated capital requirements would be \$200 million. Pease explained that the service would use the Harlem Line to reach New York City because it requires 20 minutes less running time than using the Danbury Branch.

Housatonic arranged for Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick and his Secretary of Transportation to take a rail trip on the line. Following that trip, Gov. Patrick became a strong supporter of the passenger service proposal. In fact, the Housatonic passenger service proposal was one of three rail projects in a \$175,000,000 line item in the multi-billion dollar Massachusetts bond bill passed a week ago Friday. The other two projects were passenger rail service on Cape Cod and between Worcester and Springfield over CSX track. Pease's sense is that the Cape Cod project may cost \$25 million. The Worcester-Springfield service will require agreement from CSX.

Additional support in Massachusetts is evidenced by the station planning study which is being undertaken with \$240,000 in Federal funding and a \$60,000 in kind match from Housatonic Railroad. The study is being performed by the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission. Pease cited strong public support in Massachusetts except for a small group in Stockbridge who are averse to any change in their town. He put the public support level at an 80/20 split in favor of the project.

Housatonic has developed a sample station layout in order to estimate the cost of a comprehensive, high quality station. The Canaan/ State Line station would be a high-end station with 500 parking spaces, a 400' high level platform, and would cost approximately \$3,000,000. Pease said the template provides a good and perhaps high end estimate for most stations along the line.

Massachusetts stations would likely be at Pittsfield, Lee and/or Lenox, Great Barrington and at the State Line, keeping the stations roughly ten miles apart. He imagines Stockbridge will also want a station once the service starts running.

Pease cited strong public support for the passenger service in Connecticut also. State Senator Clark Chapin did a poll on the proposal and found a similar 80/20 support level to that found in Massachusetts. Kent and West Cornwall are the two areas in northwestern Connecticut where some concerns have been expressed.

Pease then briefly touched on the freight side of Housatonic's business. He mentioned waste hauling is one area of growth. Housatonic now handles nearly 1,000 cars per year for a construction and demolition waste processor in Danbury. He mentioned another C&D waste processor constructing a facility in Watertown on the Naugatuck Railroad who plans to use rail to ship out the processed materials. He is also hopeful of seeing more municipal solid waste move by rail in the future.

Much of the Housatonic Railroad has 107# New Haven rail from the 1920s. Some rail in Canaan dates to 1876. It is difficult to afford buying new rail in this market. Unless you have a coal mine or an oil refinery at the end of your line, rail replacement is hard to justify economically. Pease expressed appreciation for a recent ConnDOT RFIP grant which will allow the railroad to replace 5 ½ miles of rail in Kent and Cornwall.

Pease mentioned that the most important drivers of success in attracting passengers to the proposed rail service are the cost of the service, the schedule, the level of passenger comfort, amenities such as wi fi, and the accommodation of bicycles on the trains. In regard to the comfort factor, intercity quality cars rather than commuter cars are proposed to be used. Bicycles will certainly be accommodated on the trains and placed within sight of the owners. Pease mentioned the Commission's September 2013 public hearing in New Milford as highlighting the importance of this issue.

Regarding the economic benefits of passenger rail service, Pease mentioned that the Downeaster rail service to Brunswick, Maine has generated \$300-400 million in new economic activity and he cited several examples of new development it has spawned.

Although Housatonic envisions eight round trips per day to Pittsfield, Pease noted that the requirement for positive train control does not kick in until service levels exceed six round trips per day. The Berkshire Line is currently unsignalized. Pease gave a cost figure of \$1,000,000 per mile for a good signal system on a private railroad.

### **Comments from the Public**

Rodney Chabot said he has ridden Housatonic's Line to Pittsfield years ago and it is a beautiful ride. He is concerned about the use of manual switching on the line if Housatonic actually runs eight trains per day.

### **Reports from Operating Entities**

Rick Schreiner mentioned that HARTransit is gearing up for Bike Week on May 12 and the State ROADEO on June 1.

### **Chairman's Report**

Chairman Maloney reported that Amtrak and the Town of Windsor Locks have come to terms on the Town's purchase of the old railroad station for a price of \$1.00. ConnDOT has already committed funds for the necessary environmental studies and for the design work for the station.

Clear Edge Technologies, the company which purchased UTC Fuel Cells, announced last Friday that they were laying off all their employees and ceasing operations. This will affect CT Transit's fuel cell bus and its powerplant at the Hartford Division garage. Fred mentioned that although Clear Edge was terminating production, he had heard at Tuesday's CT Transit meeting that the service function will be maintained for a period of time.

Kevin also mentioned that he is hearing observations and complaints from many sources within the trucking industry that the new mixture of deicing chemicals used on our highways is corroding truck frames and brake lines at an accelerated rate.

### **Old Business**

Fred Riese mentioned that a project of long-standing interest to the Commission is now moving forward fairly rapidly, that being the construction of a new bus storage and maintenance facility for the North East Transportation bus system in Waterbury, which operates as the

Waterbury Division of CT Transit. In late April, Fred submitted DEEP's comments on this project to ConnDOT. ConnDOT intends to finish design work on this facility in late spring and to advertise for construction of the facility this summer. Construction will begin in early 2015 for a planned completion date of early 2017.

### **New Business**

Fred mentioned that all CDL holders must now be examined by a certified medical examiner. Beginning May 21 of this year, bus and paratransit drivers can no longer just go to their favorite family doctor for their medical certification to verify their fitness for service. There are 155 certified medical examiners in Connecticut. Certification is for a maximum of two years but can be for a shorter period of time if the medical examiner deems appropriate. Drivers who do not receive a medical certification will be given a period of time to bring their offending health condition back into compliance but those drivers cannot drive during that time until they are successfully recertified.

Lastly, Fred mentioned the Commission's two public hearings coming up later this month: Tuesday, May 6<sup>th</sup> at the New Haven Hall of Records and Tuesday, May 13 at Stamford Government Center, both at 7:30 pm. The Commission's final spring hearing will be Monday, June 2 at Danbury City Hall, also at 7:30 pm.

Nick Lownes announced that the UConn Public Transportation Systems and t-HUB will be hosting the 3<sup>rd</sup> in an ongoing series of workshops at UConn on September 24. This workshop will focus on data, performance measurement and equity in public transportation planning and operations. Speakers will include several nationally recognized transit experts, UConn researchers and faculty, and practitioners from Connecticut.

Chairman Maloney closed the meeting at 2:58 pm.