

January 27, 2006

Mr. Thomas Cheeseman, Chairman
Connecticut Public Transportation Commission
175 Reservoir Road
Newington, Connecticut 06111

Dear Mr. Cheeseman:

The Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT), Bureau of Public Transportation, has reviewed the Connecticut Public Transportation Commission's 2005 Annual Report and Recommendations. Enclosed, highlighted in bold type, are ConnDOT's comments to the recommendations.

The observations and recommendations of the Commission are focused and insightful. ConnDOT continues to appreciate the time and effort expended by the members of the Commission to improve public transportation in the State of Connecticut.

ConnDOT looks forward to continuing our productive partnership with the Commission.

Sincerely,

Stephen E. Korta, II
Commissioner

Enclosure

1. THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS THAT AN ADDITIONAL \$3.3 MILLION BE PROVIDED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION BEGINNING IN FY 2007 TO ALLOW FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF JOB ACCESS TRANSIT SERVICES STATEWIDE. THE STATE IS FACING A REDUCTION IN FEDERAL JOB ACCESS AND REVERSE COMMUTE FUNDS THAT WILL IMPACT SERVICES BEGINNING IN THE FALL OF 2006.

Over the past six years, the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) has been using the federal Job Access and Reverse Commute program to fund significant enhancements to transit services that have been primarily targeted at improving the availability of transit services for workers.

The reduction in Job Access and Reverse Commute funding available under SAFETEA-LU will cause a significant reduction in service levels. Significant improvements have been made using these funds, improvements that are not always restricted to serving low-income workers. Job Access grants fund Sunday service in Stamford and Norwalk, neither of which had service on Sunday prior to the program. The Coastal Link is now carrying a million passengers a year, and continues to be funded by Job Access. Other services funded by the Job Access program include, night service in Danbury and New Milford, Route 32 service from Willimantic to southeastern Connecticut employment opportunities, Middletown night service, and Hartford to Bradley Airport service.

Around the state, transit providers are also struggling to continue operation of services funded by the TANF High Performance program, formerly available from the Department of Social Services. These services have been discontinued, dramatically decreased or are on the service review agenda awaiting a decision on continued funding as the funding is finally depleted.

ConnDOT has requested a budget adjustment to add \$3 million to the state fiscal year 2007 appropriation for Bus Operations to offset the anticipated loss of funding from the federal job access and TANF High Performance Bonus programs. The level of funding requested by ConnDOT and by CPTC in this recommendation should allow the services to be maintained at approximately current levels.

2. THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS THAT THE GOVERNOR OF THE STATE OF CONNECTICUT, WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION, TAKE AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THE DEBATE OVER THE FUTURE STRUCTURE OF AMTRAK, PARTICULARLY AS IT RELATES TO THE OWNERSHIP AND OPERATION OF THE NORTHEAST CORRIDOR. FURTHERMORE, THE STATE SHOULD ACTIVELY COMMUNICATE WITH OTHER NORTHEAST CORRIDOR STATES AND COORDINATE WITH THOSE STATES IN DEVELOPING A POLICY POSITION WHICH WILL BEST ENSURE THE CONTINUED OPERATION OF THE NORTHEAST CORRIDOR PASSENGER SERVICE.

The Connecticut Department of Transportation has been and will continue to be actively engaged in the debate concerning the future structure of Amtrak. Through the Department's participation with various organizations such as CONEG (Coalition of Northeast Governors), AASHTO (American Association of Highway Transportation Officials), I-95 Corridor Coalition, APTA (American Public Transportation Officials), NASTO (Northeast Association of State Transportation Officials) the Department maintains active communication with other northeast corridor states on this issue. The Department is fully engaged in the policy formation process concerning the rights and obligations of ownership and operation. The Department is working closely with the State's Congressional Delegation concerning Amtrak legislation and the state's position on the future of Amtrak.

At the same time, the Department recognizes the need to move goods by means other than by truck. The Department continues to monitor the activities of the East of the Hudson Rail Freight Task Force, as well as other initiatives along Connecticut's borders, which may affect both rail freight and passenger service in CT. These include the Tappan Zee Bridge EIS and planning initiatives being administered by the Pioneer Valley Transit Transportation Commission in Massachusetts. The Department continues to participate in the Northeast Rail Operations Study.

3. THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS THAT THE STATE OF CONNECTICUT IMPLEMENT A PROGRAM TO INCREASE SUBSTANTIALLY TRANSIT USAGE BY STATE EMPLOYEES. WHETHER THIS IS DONE THROUGH FREE TRANSIT PASSES AS MANY FEDERAL EMPLOYEES RECEIVE, A PRE-PAID FARE PROGRAM, A SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN THE EXISTING \$3.00 PER MONTH DISCOUNT, OR SOME OTHER MECHANISM, THE STATE SHOULD MATCH THE EXAMPLE OF MANY PRIVATE CONNECTICUT EMPLOYERS WHO PROVIDE SIGNIFICANT LEVELS OF SUPPORT TO PROMOTE TRANSIT USE BY THEIR EMPLOYEES.

ConnDOT agrees that employer supported transportation benefit programs are an excellent way to entice commuters to all transit modes thereby increasing ridership.

The Department is not in a position to implement employee benefit programs for the State Of Connecticut. However, ConnDOT can provide support for the development, adoption and implementation of any such program(s), including the variety of programs mentioned in the recommendation itself. ConnDOT has traditionally supported the implementation of employer programs through a network of Transportation Demand Management contractors.

Additionally, The Office of the State Comptroller in partnership with the ConnDOT has implemented a Qualified Transportation Fringe Benefit Program pursuant to the provisions of Public Act No. 02-123. This program allows State employees to pay for commuting expenses on buses, trains or vanpools on a pre-tax basis. The program is operated utilizing a contractor, Brokerage Concepts, Inc. and Benefit Concepts, Inc. (BCI). Employees may enroll in the program on a monthly basis. Once enrolled, changes in election can also be made on a monthly basis during the calendar year. Employees may obtain enrollment forms, change forms and claim forms by contacting BCI toll free at (877) 629-1500.

ConnDOT will facilitate a meeting with the pertinent parties to discuss the expansion of transit incentive programs beyond the current transit pass discount and the employee benefit program cited above, and who the appropriate lead agencies will need to be under the various scenarios.

4. THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS THAT ALL DIVISIONS OF CTTRANSIT ADOPT THE POLICY THAT IF THE CURB AT A DESIGNATED BUS STOP CANNOT BE ACCESSED DUE TO VEHICLES, SNOW, CONSTRUCTION, OR OTHER CONDITIONS, THE BUS WILL PROCEED TO THE NEAREST SAFE LOCATION TO DEPLOY ITS HANDICAP RAMP INSTEAD OF ATTEMPTING TO DEPLOY THE RAMP AT THE DESIGNATED STOP. THIS ALLOWS FOR A SAFER USE OF THE RAMP AND A LESS STEEP ANGLE FOR RAMP DEPLOYMENT.

ConnDOT supports the Commission's recommendation that all divisions of CTTransit adopt a policy that, if the curb at a designated bus stop cannot be accessed due to vehicles, snow, construction or other conditions, the bus will proceed to the nearest safe location to deploy its ramp. ConnDOT can also initiate a policy that all service providers train drivers not to block curb cuts and crosswalks during layovers, though restricting stops at curb cuts and crosswalks could be impossible given the corner locations of the majority of bus stops and the difficulty in safely pulling into and accessing curbside bus stops even under normal circumstances. Most of the other issues, such as installing curb cuts where needed, providing proper snow removal, making accessibility a requirement for construction permits, and enforcement of parking violations are within the control of local authorities, such as public works and police. Such policies would be difficult to write in universally acceptable terms, and difficult to enforce.

5. THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS THAT THE DEPARTMENT SUPPORT EFFORTS BY THE WINDHAM REGIONAL TRANSIT DISTRICT TO SECURE FEDERAL FUNDING FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A VEHICLE STORAGE AND MAINTENANCE FACILITY.

ConnDOT has historically supported all thirteen of the state's active transit districts in meeting the needs of their respective operations, including all capital requirements. Federal funds and the required local match have been provided within the parameters of the Bureau of Public Transportation's 20-year Transit Capital Project Management Plan. This dynamic, fiscally-constrained Plan prioritizes all of the state's bus and rail capital projects based upon the State and federal funds that can reasonably be expected to be made available on an annual basis throughout the 20-year horizon. Within the past year, ConnDOT has funded and purchased replacement buses for the district. It is anticipated that an additional replacement bus order will be placed within the next 8-10 months.

To the extent possible, ConnDOT will work with the Windham Regional Transit District to program funds in the appropriate year to effect a vehicle storage and maintenance facility that suits the needs of the transit district.

6. THE COMMISSION AGAIN RECOMMENDS THAT IDENTIFICATION OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCREASING THE CAPACITY FOR TRUCKS AT THE REST AREAS ALONG CONNECTICUT'S INTERSTATE HIGHWAYS SHOULD BE A MAJOR THRUST OF CONNDOT'S CURRENT STATEWIDE REST AREA AND SERVICE PLAZA STUDY.

The Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) also recognizes (as does the Commission) that truck parking capacity is a major issue along Connecticut's Interstate highways. In July 2005, ConnDOT began an eighteen month study of Connecticut's Rest Areas and Service Plazas Statewide. This study will look at ways of optimizing overall capacity and operations (including truck parking capacity) at existing locations, as well as, potential expansion of some locations, relocation or elimination of some sites, and potential construction of additional sites. This is being done to better serve and improve safety for the motoring public in general.

To date, both a Steering Committee and an Advisory Committee have been established and have been meeting regularly to discuss all the issues associated with this study. A website www.ctrestareas.org has also been created and provides detailed information concerning the subject study.

7. THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS THAT THE DEPARTMENT, AS PART OF ITS TAXICAB LICENSING PROCEDURE, REQUIRE ALL COMPANIES, CURRENT AND FUTURE, OPERATING THREE OR MORE VEHICLES IN TAXICAB SERVICE, TO OPERATE AT LEAST ONE DUAL USE VEHICLE CAPABLE OF SERVICE AMBULATORY CUSTOMERS AS WELL AS CUSTOMERS WITH DISABILITIES, INCLUDING THOSE WHO USE WHEELCHAIRS

ConnDOT agrees with the Commission's recommendation that more can be done to assure that publicly regulated services such as taxicabs are more universally available to people with disabilities.

There are a number of issues that need to be addressed as a policy is finalized. These include, but are not limited to, concerns about what size a company should be before such a requirement is mandated, what types of vehicles and what level of accessibility would be approved (and do vehicles meet the state's taxicab regulations or the regulations need to be amended to allow accessible vehicles), and whether there are ways this goal can be accomplished without creating a mandate. For example, could the state provide incentives such as allowing a company an additional permit over and above the proven public and convenience and necessity if an additional vehicle is accessible. A property tax credit of some kind might also be an incentive that could encourage voluntary purchase and use of accessible vehicles.

ConnDOT proposes to prepare a briefing paper on this matter and bring the matter before the Taxi Advisory Council at the next of their meetings, which are facilitated by ConnDOT.

8. THE COMMISSION AGAIN COMMENDS CONNDOT FOR UNDERTAKING THE NEW HAVEN–HARTFORD–SPRINGFIELD COMMUTER RAIL IMPLEMENTATION PLAN, AND ITS INTENT TO SEEK FUNDING FOR THE PREPARATION OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT FOR THIS PROJECT. THE COMMISSION ENDORSES THE DEPARTMENT’S SELECTION OF A REASONABLE, MID-RANGE OPTION AS THE PREFERRED IMPLEMENTATION PLAN FOR THIS SERVICE.

The Connecticut Department of Transportation appreciates the support of the CPTC in further developing this initiative. The Department intends to seek the needed funding to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement, which will include refinement of the proposed Implementation Plan, preliminary engineering and environmental analysis and documentation.

9. THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS THAT ADEQUATE BENCHES BE PROVIDED AT ALL NEW HAVEN LINE AND SHORE LINE EAST STATIONS TO PROVIDE COMFORT AND CONVENIENCE TO FARE PAYERS.

The Department is acknowledges inconsistencies in the location and number of bench seating at Connecticut commuter rail stations. A Connecticut station standards manual is now being developed, and standardization of amenities is a key feature of this effort. Generally, the location and number of benches will be a function of available space and peak station ridership levels, as a customer convenience. At stations such as South Norwalk and New Haven where there are benches in station waiting areas, the Department is evaluating further possible additions to platform benches as well.

10. THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS THAT CONNDOT COMPILE A MASTER LIST OF POTENTIAL “NEW STARTS” OF FIXED ROUTE AND RURAL TRANSPORTATION SERVICES. THIS LIST COULD BE DEVELOPED AS PART OF THE STATEWIDE PLANNING EFFORT TO DETERMINE HOW BEST TO EMPLOY THE 23 NEW BUSES TO BE ACQUIRED NEXT YEAR AS AN ELEMENT OF THE GOVERNOR’S \$1.3 BILLION TRANSPORTATION INITIATIVE. SUCH A LIST WOULD BE COMPILED FROM SUBMITTALS BY TRANSIT DISTRICTS, METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATIONS OR OTHER QUALIFIED ENTITIES WHO WOULD SUBMIT DOCUMENTED REQUESTS FOR NEW SERVICES. THESE SUBMITTALS WOULD THEN BE REVIEWED AND RANKED AND A PRIORITIZATION METHODOLOGY DEVELOPED USING A STATEWIDE OR REGIONAL COLLABORATIVE PROCESS FACILITATED BY CONNDOT. A MASTER LIST WOULD THEN BE ESTABLISHED FOR THE ADDITION OF ANY NEW FIXED-ROUTE OR RURAL SERVICES USING THE PRIORITIES DEVELOPED BY THE COLLABORATION.

ConnDOT supports the Commission’s recommendation to compile a master list of potential new bus transit services.

ConnDOT in coordination with Regional Planning Organizations and transit operators could coordinate and facilitate efforts to compile a statewide list of potential new transit services. Using a regional collaborative process, potential additional transit services could be proposed for discussion, evaluated for costs and benefits, ranked, and included in a regional listing of viable additional transit services that can then be integrated into a prioritized statewide list.

It is important to note that any planning for new urban fixed route initiatives would need to consider the obligation and additional funding requirement of providing mandatory Americans with Disability Act Paratransit services.

11. THE COMMISSION COMMENDS THE NEW HAVEN DIVISION OF CONNECTICUT TRANSIT FOR THE DRIVER TRAINING PROGRAM IT HAS INSTITUTED TO IMPROVE THE SENSITIVITY AND EQUIPMENT FAMILIARITY OF ITS DRIVERS IN PROVIDING SERVICE TO DISABLED TRANSIT USERS.

ConnDOT is pleased to see the positive comments relating to driver training in the New Haven Division of CTTransit. We would note however, that this exact same training, and retraining, is taking place in the Hartford and Stamford divisions. All three divisions incorporate films, literature and the assistance of members of the disability community in training new drivers, re-training experienced drivers and especially in correcting drivers who need special attention.

It should also be pointed out that these materials and training principles have been made available for the training of drivers at all CTTransit divisions, as well as drivers employed by all transit districts throughout the state. All operators are given both technical training, such as wheelchair securement methodologies, and sensitivity training. Training is administered to all trainers, and remedial training is given as merited.

12. THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS THAT THE DEPARTMENT PROCEED TO INSTALL A CENTRALIZED TRAFFIC CONTROL (CTC) SYSTEM ON THE DANBURY BRANCH OF THE NEW HAVEN LINE WITH THE OBJECTIVE OF INCREASING SERVICE LEVELS TO THE TRAVELING PUBLIC.

The Department has been working to further improve the service quality on the Danbury Branch through infrastructure improvements and studying service options. While minor adjustments may be considered in the existing service pattern, significant changes can only be addressed with the addition of the CTC system, additional equipment, and additional passing sidings. There are however limitations on what can be accomplished within the existing infrastructure. The Department recognizes that the Centralized Train Control (CTC) system installation is an important project for the branch service.

The CTC design revisions are scheduled to be complete in the Spring of 2006. The construction contract will be advertised in the Summer of 2006, estimated completion is October 2008. The project cost is estimated at \$16m. Funding at this level has been programmed.

13. THE COMMISSION COMMENDS THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOR RESTORING FUNDS TO THE FORMER TRANSPORTATION STRATEGY BOARD TRANSIT ENHANCEMENTS AND ALLOWING THEM TO CONTINUE.

ConnDOT, in coordination with the transit services providers statewide, will continue reviewing and monitoring the performance of these transit enhancements, and to promptly adjust them to emerging and changing needs of transit services.

14. THE COMMISSION COMMENDS THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOR INCLUDING WITHIN PUBLIC ACT 05-4 FUNDING IN THE AMOUNT OF \$10,000,000 TO PROVIDE FOR STATE MATCHING GRANTS TO SUPPORT ELDERLY AND DISABLED DEMAND RESPONSE TRANSPORTATION, ALSO KNOWN AS DIAL-A-RIDE TRANSPORTATION, BY FUNDING THE PROGRAM ORIGINALLY SET FORTH IN CONNECTICUT GENERAL STATUTES (CGS) SECTION 13b-38bb. THIS FINANCIAL SUPPORT WILL ALLOW FOR A SIGNIFICANT ENHANCEMENT OF DIAL-A-RIDE SERVICES AND WILL GREATLY IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF THESE TRANSIT DEPENDENT CITIZENS.

The General Assembly has made \$5 million available in each of state fiscal years 2006 and 2007 for the State matching grant program for elderly and disabled demand responsive transportation. The grants will be made available to municipalities, or to transit districts or regional planning organizations as coordinating entities.

The Department has worked to create a grant program that will ensure effective use of the funding by encouraging coordinated applications, requiring that matching funds be at least equal to the grant funds, and that grant funds not be used to replace other funds.

While CGS, Section 13b-38bb, requires annual reporting of financial and statistical information, the Department is requiring quarterly reporting of basic statistical data in order to obtain significant data to use to support continued funding of the program during the 2007 legislative session.

While \$5 million is a significant amount of money, it does not translate to large grants for each municipality. Grants range in size from a low of \$7,700 to the largest at \$105,000. Programs funded by these smaller grants will benefit from the matching requirement, which helps to create a more substantial program.

The implementation of this Dial-a-Ride Municipal Grant is in progress. Application packages have been distributed statewide to the Regional Planning Organizations (RPOs) for distribution to their member municipalities, and for the RPOs to coordinate regional service plans. The applications are due to be submitted to ConnDOT by March 2006. It is anticipated that services funded by the grant program can begin by July 1, 2006.

