

## **AGENDA**

### CONNECTICUT PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION MEETING

**September 7, 2006 - 1:30 PM**

Legislative Office Building  
Conference Room 1B  
Hartford

1. Approval of the August 3, 2006 meeting minutes
2. Speaker: ConnDOT Dep. Commissioner James Boice
3. Comments from the public
4. Comments from operating entities
5. Chairman's report
6. Old business
7. New business

CONNECTICUT PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION  
Minutes of August 3, 2006

ConnDOT Building, Conference Room B  
Berlin Turnpike, Newington

Chairman Tom Cheeseman called the meeting to order at 1:30 p.m. The minutes of the meeting of July 13, 2006 were approved with three abstentions.

**Featured Speaker**

Commission member Terry Hall introduced Patricia Douglas, Executive Director of the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority. Terry elaborated that the movement to start passenger rail service between Boston and Portland began in the early 1980s through the initiative of Wayne Davis. By 1993, the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority (NNEPRA) was created, based in Portland, Maine. Terry then turned the floor over to Ms. Douglas.

Patricia Douglas mentioned that she has lived in Maine for 18 years now but is a Taftville, Conn. native and a graduate of Eastern Connecticut State University. Legislation to create NNEPRA was passed by the Maine legislature in 1990. In 1998, NNEPRA received \$23,000,000 in federal funds under a provision of the Taxpayer Relief Act. Efforts then began in earnest to return passenger service over this route after a 30 year lapse since it had been discontinued. Though the Boston to Portland rail service, known as the Downeaster, runs through three states, only Maine provides operating support for the service.

The price tag to get the Downeaster service running initially was \$70,000,000. In addition to the \$23,000,000 from the Taxpayer Relief Act, the balance of the funding came from FTA and CMAQ funds. Work on capital improvements began in 1997 and the service commenced operation in December 2001. The rehabilitation of the 116 mile line involved the installation of 100,000 ties as part of the upgrade from FRA Class 2 to FRA Class 4 track, repairs to 31 bridges, upgrades at 37 public grade crossings, and the construction of seven new stations. Most of the 10 stations used by the Downeaster are municipally owned.

NNEPRA has a 20-year contract with Amtrak to run the Downeaster service. Amtrak provides 3 train sets, two of which are used to run the service and one kept as a spare. The train sets are push-pull equipment, each with a locomotive, 3 coaches, and a split club/café car. Each train set has a capacity of 234 passengers. Amtrak supplies the train crews, a ticket agent for the Portland station, a reservation system, and train maintenance. Amtrak periodically swaps the equipment used on the line, therefore there are no Downeaster logos on the trains. Douglas observed that "We look like an Amtrak train, but we are different."

The Downeaster runs between Portland Station and Boston's North Station. Portland Station is owned by Concord Trailways and serves as their bus terminal, so it is a multimodal station. Fifty percent of the expenses of the station are paid for by NNEPRA. An Amtrak ticket

agent is based here. NNEPRA has 600 parking spaces and just purchased an additional parking lot to meet growing demand. Four round trips per day are run. A Flexpass with Concord Trailways is offered which allows travelers to ride the train to Boston and take the bus back. NNEPRA also has limited service train stations at Wells, Maine, Dover, New Hampshire, and Woburn, Mass., and platform-only stations at Saco, Maine, Exeter and Durham, New Hampshire and Haverhill, Mass. Lastly, the Old Orchard Beach station operates seasonally from April to November.

Ridership on the Downeaster was approximately 290,000 in 2002, the first full year of operation. It fell to 255,000 in 2003 and 250,000 in 2004, but has increased significantly since then. A reduction in the Portland to Boston travel time from 2:45 to 2:30 in April 2005 began the ridership climb, which was further boosted when gas prices shot up after Hurricane Katrina. Ridership in 2006 will be over 300,000.

Subsidy per passenger was \$22.10 in FY 2005 and dropped to \$21.48 in FY 2006. Fare box recovery was 38% for FY2005 and 41% for FY2006, though some atypical capital expenses were reflected in these numbers so the actual fare box recovery is likely to be higher on an on-going basis.

The foremost challenge for the Downeaster is to improve scheduling and frequency. NNEPRA is negotiating with MBTA to get better departure slots from North Station. Ultimately, NNEPRA desires time slot approval for a fifth round trip per day, which could be accomplished with the existing equipment. Installation of additional passing sidings will also be required before a fifth train can be added. Work on these sidings, located at Dover, New Hampshire and South Portland, is currently underway and should be completed by spring 2007.

In the longer term, NNEPRA may look at owning its own equipment. DMU cars are being considered, which would offer better fuel efficiency and cleaner operation. Extension of Downeaster service east to Brunswick is also an ultimate goal for the service.

Douglas cited the advantages of dealing with Amtrak and the resources they bring to the partnership. They have brand recognition with the public, resources, and railroad experience. They also have rights to the 116 mile corridor, of which Guilford owns 78 miles from Portland to Plaistow, NH and MBTA owns the southern 38 miles. Difficulties of working with Amtrak are their size, the tendency to employ 'one size fits all' solutions, their constrained financial situation, their year-to-year budget insecurity, and the lack of transparency in following money through their structure.

NNEPRA has a total staff of five people. Its capital budget is \$7,000,000 and its operating budget is \$13,000,000.

Douglas cited the Downeaster as the #1 passenger rail service in the country for on-time performance and the #1 service run by Amtrak according to its surveys of customer satisfaction.

In response to a question about how Amtrak might react if NNEPRA bought its own DMU (Diesel Multiple Unit) cars, Douglas mentioned that Amtrak had made the original

suggestion to consider this equipment. She also said this equipment would become more desirable if additional rail lines are operated for passenger service. However, Douglas again stressed that securing a fifth daily round trip is the top priority of NNEPRA before any new lines are considered.

Douglas also said that CMAQ funding has been extended through 2009 to cover operating expenses, but the State of Maine will not extend its funding commitment to the service until a study of its effectiveness and value is completed.

In closing, Terry Hall suggested that the Downeaster model would be a good template for the Springfield Line commuter rail service in Connecticut. And Mort Katz, who had just seen the musical "My Fair Lady", could not help but observe that all indications show "the train in Maine is plainly making a gain."

### **Comments from the Public**

None.

### **Reports from Operating Entities**

Peter Richter of the ConnDOT Office of Rails noted that year-to-date ridership is up 2.6% on the New Haven Line and 10.9% on Shore Line East. Shore Line East ridership is now averaging 1,764 per day or 423,000 rides annually. New Haven Line annual ridership is now at a rate of 33,000,000.

Richter then recapped progress on several elements of ConnDOT's Equipment Availability Improvement Program. The running repair shop in New Haven Yard will open this fall. The contract for the M-8 commuter rail cars was awarded last week. The \$522,000,000 contract will provide initially for 210 cars, with options for an additional 90 cars and 170 cars. Six more Virginia Rail Express (VRE) cars are in Yonkers now for rehabilitation. Fifteen to 18 VRE cars will be done by year's end. Though not an element of equipment availability, Richter also mentioned that catenary replacement work is going well.

For the sake of comparison with the Downeaster service, Richter mentioned that ConnDOT operates 292 trains per day, of which 266 are on the New Haven Line and the balance are Shore Line East. The New Haven Line achieves 70% fare box recovery, with an average per passenger subsidy of \$1.28. It carried 31,300,000 passengers in FY 2005. The New Canaan Branch carried 1,400,000 passengers with an average subsidy of \$2.47. The Danbury Branch carries 700,000 passengers annually at an average subsidy of \$8.43. Shore Line East carried 407,000 passengers in FY 2005 and had an average passenger subsidy of \$19.37.

Parking capacity was the last topic addressed by Richter. Governor Rell's Roadmap initiative contains funding for parking improvements on the New Haven Line, its branches, and Shore Line East. West Haven (or Orange), Stratford, Milford, Bridgeport, and Fairfield are slated for parking capacity improvements on the New Haven Line. In response to a question from Dick Carpenter about possible double decking of the Westport parking lot, Richter replied

that this had absolutely been considered but the town was not warm to this idea. Richter said the department is in ongoing discussions with all New Haven Line towns about any opportunities to increase parking capacity. Stratford will soon have an additional 435 spaces.

Tom Cheeseman inquired about Amtrak service interruptions which would necessitate the busing of some passengers. Richter elaborated that beginning next week, Amtrak will be doing work on the Branford River Bridge. The work will be going on 24 hours per day, 7 days a week for three weeks. During this time, rail traffic on the bridge will be confined to a single track. Passengers on two trains each evening will need to be bussed around the bridge. At all other times, the train schedule can be accommodated on the single track.

Rich Sunderhauf reported that bids by Connecticut Transit drivers for new runs will occur on August 13<sup>th</sup>.

Russ St. John said that the Providence and Worcester is staying very busy. Upgrading work is occurring on the Wethersfield Secondary. Brush clearing on the Davisville Branch is taking place in anticipation of increased auto traffic.

Several studies are in the works at Housatonic Area Regional Transit. Richard Schreiner mentioned that a study on the expansion of Harlem Line shuttles would be completed in the next couple of weeks. Another upcoming study will revisit the possibility of a new bus service linking Danbury and Waterbury. Such a proposal is complicated by an existing private operator in the corridor. Also, a new Danbury-Bridgeport bus service operated in cooperation with the Greater Bridgeport Transit Authority is just getting off the ground.

Fred Riese reported that work is continuing to secure an agreement between DEP, Providence and Worcester Railroad and the Valley Railroad to govern use of the DEP-owned property north of the Old Saybrook Wye by P&W to turn or store freight trains. Such usage of the property has gone on for many years but there has been no formal agreement to authorize it.

### **Chairman's Report**

Tom Cheeseman reported that the Middletown Transit District has been working on an emergency evacuation plan in the event of any emergencies related to the recent extreme heat. No evacuations have occurred to date.

### **Old Business**

Dick Carpenter briefly discussed the revised Northeast Rail Operations Study or NERO's report, a copy of which he obtained via Carmine Trotta. He finds the study to be deficient in a number of ways. He can find no mention in the report of the proposed New York Harbor freight rail tunnel. The report does show many major New England and New York highways are operating at levels of service (LOS) E or F, showing the need for improvements to the freight rail network to reduce this congestion, which is predicted to worsen considerably in coming years.

Carpenter discussed an interesting but disturbing fact he found in the study. Double stack containers from northern New Jersey bound for Boston travel a circuitous 637 mile route via DeWitt Yard in Syracuse. Because of vertical clearance restrictions in Massachusetts, the container trains must be split from double stack to single stack at DeWitt Yard, the nearest facility at which this function can be performed. Therefore, these containers go from northern New Jersey to Albany, west to Syracuse, are split there, go back to Albany and then head on to Boston. Dick asked for a presentation by the NERO's consultant to the Commission at a future meeting.

### **New Business**

Fred Riese noted the recently released schedule for the Commission's fall public hearings: Waterbury on September 13, Plainville on September 27, Litchfield on October 10, and Danbury on October 24. He volunteered to moderate the Waterbury public hearing and he asked for volunteers for the other hearings. Mort Katz volunteered to moderate in Plainville, Tom Cheeseman will do so in Litchfield, and Rick Schriener will moderate the Danbury hearing.

Yvonne Loteczka noted that a Laidlaw Transportation vehicle she was riding in had a designated emergency evacuation window next to the wheelchair tie-down location. She noted that she could not possibly reach or use this window. She was told that the company policy is that, in the event of an emergency, passengers are instructed to leave the vehicle in the same manner they entered it. If a passenger walked on, they should walk off. If they were assisted on, they should be assisted off. Tom Cheeseman confirmed that this was the policy at Middletown Transit District also.

Robert Zarnetske asked Chairman Cheeseman if a time extension should be requested from the Transportation Strategy Board from the September 1 date set for submittal of any comments from the Commission on the TSB's 2003 Transportation Strategy. Cheeseman asked Zarnetske and any other members with comments to submit them to him a few days in advance of the September 1 date.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:30 p.m.

CONNECTICUT PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION  
MEETING ATTENDANCE

Thursday, August 3, 2006

ConnDOT Headquarters, Conference Room B  
Berlin Turnpike, Newington

VOTING MEMBERS

Linda Blair  
Tom Cheeseman  
Terry Hall  
Yvonne Loteczka  
Richard Sunderhauf  
Russ St. John  
Richard Schreiner  
Richard Carpenter  
Mort Katz  
Robert Zarnetske  
Kevin Maloney

GUESTS

Robert Hamersley  
Stephen Troster  
Patricia Douglas

EX-OFFICIO MEMBERS

Frederick Riese

ConnDOT STAFF

Peter Richter  
Len Lapsis  
Dennis King