

Connecticut Public Transportation Commission
Minutes of November 3, 2011

Hearing Room 1-C, Legislative Office Building
Hartford, Connecticut

Attendance: Members: Christopher Adams, Morton Katz, Yvonne Loteczka, Robert Rodman, Russell St. John, Richard Schreiner, Richard Sunderhauf, Alan Sylvestre, **Ex-officio members:** Fred Riese, ConnDEEP. **ConnDOT staff:** Dennis King. **Guests:** Susan VanBenschoten, Craig Lader, Jonathan Chew, David Hannon, Stephen Troster, Michael Bloom.

Vice-chairman Richard Schreiner opened the meeting at 1:35 p.m. The minutes of the meeting of October 6, 2011 were approved as written.

Featured Speaker

Susan VanBenschoten of Fitzgerald and Halliday, supported by Craig Lader of the South Western Regional Planning Agency and Jonathan Chew and Dave Hannon of the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials, provided a presentation on the recently completed Route 7 Transportation and Land Use Study. The study area was the 16-mile corridor between the expressway sections of Route 7 in Danbury and Norwalk, including the towns of Ridgefield, Redding and Wilton. The purpose of the study was to develop a plan to address long range travel and community quality of life issues along the study corridor. The intent was to develop a plan that fills gaps in the transportation system, encourages appropriate development, and balances the effectiveness of the corridor for a wide range of users.

Craig Lader opened the presentation. There are four rail stations in the corridor, counting the Merritt 7 station at the southern end of the study corridor, and there is a possibility of a future fifth rail station being added at Georgetown.

Lader explained that the Route 7 corridor serves three classes of trips: local commuter trips which occur entirely within the corridor, commuting trips beginning within the corridor but terminating elsewhere, and trips going through the corridor with neither trip terminus occurring in the corridor. The corridor is characterized by peak hour congestion and varying roadway profiles.

The topography within the corridor presents engineering challenges with much of the corridor being in a narrow valley. The Route 7 roadway corridor is generally unsuitable for biking or walking.

Susan VanBenschoten spoke of the substantial amount of public outreach that was included in the Route 7 Transportation and Land Use Study. The public outreach measures, which included a stakeholder committee and an advisory group, were intended to help the study team balance local and regional needs and to provide guidance on desirable multi-modal choices and connections. VanBenschoten said the study team looked at the types of retail services which may be in short supply or lacking entirely within the corridor and which therefore force people to

drive elsewhere to find them. The study looked at village centers within the corridor to see what opportunities might exist to expand them, especially around the train stations.

The Danbury-Norwalk Route 7 LINK and Danbury Branch rail line provide the primary transit connectivity in the corridor. Development in the corridor is uneven but, at this point, the corridor is mostly built out. ConnDOT owns much of the land in the study area including both Route 7 itself and the parallel corridor acquired in anticipation of a Super 7 highway that at this point is unlikely to be constructed. The study team recognized the desirability of utilizing the Super 7 corridor to keep it open as an option for transportation purposes, but it also recognized the divided positions of residents in the area. Use of the land at this point is planned for the Norwalk River Valley Trail Greenway.

Three focus areas within the corridor for which conceptual plans for transit-oriented development (TOD) projects were formulated were Wilton Station, Branchville Station and the Ridgefield gateway area centered at the intersection of Routes 7 and 35. At Wilton Station, there is adequate parking for current demand, but the study looked to accommodate a higher level of future parking demand. The study looked at the optimal siting of a parking structure at Wilton Station along with a design that could incorporate retail uses into the lower level of the structure. The station improvements would be designed in a style to provide a more attractive gateway from the station to the village center of Wilton.

At Branchville, the study calls for an enhanced train station including more surface parking, landscaped medians, and sidewalk improvements along with provisions for multi-modal connections including a bus stop, bus shelters, a taxi stop, bike racks and bike storage, and pedestrian connections to the village center. Infill development on the west side of Route 7 and a parking structure with ground level retail uses are also recommended.

Recommended improvements at Ridgefield include mixed use redevelopment of the southwest corner of the 7/35 intersection, a new traffic signal for the housing development up on the hill, a landscaped median between this signal and the one at the 7/35 intersection, sidewalks on both side of Route 7, protected crosswalks, a pathway to the housing complex, and bus stops.

Moving from the land use side of the study to the transportation side, the study does not envision widening of the 2-lane sections of Route 7 except for adding a fourth lane for a small area at the southern end of the study corridor. Van Benschoten said the study team felt that widening Route 7 would be a case of “If you build it, they will come” so the study team shied away from major roadway expansion. Instead, the team looked at some roadway cross-section modifications, intersection improvements, and enhancements to transit services and bicycle and pedestrian access. Roadway shoulder upgrades and better access management are also proposed.

VanBenschoten noted that, while there are some bicyclists using Route 7, they are commuters, not recreational cyclist.

The Danbury Branch Electrification Study was on-going during the Route 7 study effort and whatever improvements come out of the Danbury Branch study are considered part of the baseline for the Route 7 improvements. Other transit improvements seen as benefitting the

corridor are the upgrading of the Route 7-LINK bus service from hourly to half hour headways and the addition of a Branchville-Georgetown-Ridgefield circulator shuttle service. Also mentioned was that ADA evaluations of every intersection in the corridor were performed.

Proposed bicycle improvements in the corridor consist of shoulder upgrades, bicycle accommodations at intersections, a bicycle signage program, bike racks at convenient locations and the advancement of the Norwalk River Valley Trail development.

The overall cost of all the recommendations in the study is estimated at \$31 million. The bulk of this would be spent in the TOD upgrades of the areas around the Branchville and Wilton rail stations which total \$25.4 million. The Ridgefield Gateway improvements are estimated at \$1.2 million. Bus signal prioritization in the corridor is estimated at \$600,000.

Ridgefield and Redding recently submitted a joint application for the TOD enhancements recommended by the study. Unfortunately, the application was not successful because large urban areas were targeted in the selection of the grant awards. The respective communities and planning agencies have agreed to meet on an ongoing basis to measure progress on the implementation of the plan.

The study does recommend zoning changes to allow for higher densities of development near rail stations but does not specify the classes of development for those areas. The intent is to allow for development near stations to reflect demand, which may be for residential or commercial needs at different times. Regarding access management, the study did recommend best management practices for the approval of new curb cuts. Also, design review committees have been constituted in each town.

Regarding the Norwalk River Valley Trail, VanBenschoten said an RFP has gone out and a design consultant has been selected but she was not sure how much work has been accomplished to date.

Regarding a question as to whether bus priority signalization has been tried anywhere in Connecticut, Craig Lader responded that he didn't know of any application of this strategy within Connecticut, but that SWRPA has recommended its use previously in other studies. He noted that in a current study, the Coastal Corridor Bus Study, looking at all the bus routes operating on Route 1 from the New York line to Madison, signal pre-emption for buses may be recommended.

Lastly, VanBenschoten noted that the Route 7 study benefitted from a high level of participation and support from ConnDOT.

Comments from the public

None.

Comments from Operating Entities

Fred Riese noted that DEEP reviewed a draft environmental assessment on the proposed New Haven-Hartford – Springfield rail service proposal and provided comments to ConnDOT.

He further reported that Waterbury evening bus service began on October 24, an initiative supported by the Commission. Early ridership numbers indicate 400-500 trips per night.

Russ St. John indicated that Providence and Worcester had recovered from the storm and resumed normal operations.

Richard Sunderhauf circulated an article from *IN TRANSIT* magazine that spotlighted the problem of bathroom breaks for transit employees. The article indicated that this is a long-standing problem in the industry.

Richard Schreiner report that HARTransit had curtailed service during the storm on Saturday, October 29 by 2:30 PM with several vehicles disabled. By 4 PM, the City of Danbury had declared a Level 3 snow emergency, ending service for the day, and roads were virtually impassable. There are still some streets that cannot be served and power outages are widespread.

Chairman's Report

Chairman Maloney was unable to attend the meeting as his business and residence were still without power.

Summary of Fall Public Hearings

Fred Riese provided a summary of the fall public hearings. The Torrington hearing was well attended by CPTC members, but only the Litchfield Hills Regional Planning Agency and the Northwestern Connecticut Transit District presented testimony. The major focus of the discussion was the need for a bus storage and maintenance facility in Torrington. The Bond Commission approved funding for such a facility in August there has been a lack of communication from ConnDOT to the local entities concerning the next steps in the design and development processes.

Both the Wilton and Westport hearings highlighted the need for improvements to rail service, in particular the Danbury Branch Line. Former CPTC member and now Representative Gail Lavielle suggested that it would be better for the state to focus on investment in existing infrastructure before expansion projects such as Springfield Line commuter rail service or the New Britain Busway. The Wilton hearing featured both a presentation by ConnDOT staff on the Danbury Branch Line CTC project and citizen testimony citing the shortcomings of the current Danbury Branch schedule and travel times as reasons the Branch does not receive more ridership and why many residents of the corridor either drive to main line stations or use the Harlem Line in New York.

The sole topic of the Plainville hearing was the Hartford-New Britain busway, universally opposed by the attendees at the meeting. Mike Sanders provided a presentation on the busway proposal's history and its current status before public comment began. Fred noted that many of the comments in opposition to the busway showed a lack of understanding of the project and particularly of its financing.

Old Business

Fred Riese indicated that he had received only 7 requests for reimbursement from Commission members. Those present indicated they had already received payments.

Planning for the Annual Work Session

The annual work session will take place at Union Station in New Haven at 5 PM on November 17. Commissioners were asked to prepare potential recommendations or concepts for discussion.

New Business

Vice chairman Rick Schreiner mentioned that ConnDOT Commissioner Jim Redeker will be the speaker at the December 1 meeting in Newington.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:04 p.m.