

Connecticut Public Transportation Commission

December 2, 2010

ConnDOT Headquarters, Conference Room B
2800 Berlin Turnpike, Newington

Attendance: Members: Kevin Maloney, Richard Schreiner, Yvonne Loteczka, Morton Katz, Richard Sunderhauf, Alan Sylvestre, Russ St. John, Chris Adams, Robert Rodman. **Ex-officio members:** Susan Simmat (OPM), Frederick Riese (DEP). **DOT Staff:** Dennis King, Sherry Osterling. **Guests:** Colin Pease, Terry Hall, Jan Lindberg, Stephen Troster.

Chairman Maloney opened the meeting at 1:35 pm. The minutes of the meeting of November 4, 2010 were approved as written with one clarification and one correction which Dick Carpenter e-mailed to Fred Riese. In paragraph 3 under New Business, the reference to 600 passenger trains on the Aurora Metro Commuter Line in Chicago should be changed to 100 trains. Also, in the last paragraph under Featured Speaker, Dick's actual comment was that New Jersey Gov. Christie cancelled the proposed NJ Transit tunnels to Penn Station but he did not say that a contract had been let to fill in any partial tunnels. Also Dick had said that Connecticut had an interest in seeing that any new rail tunnel under the Hudson River to Penn Station be interconnected with the existing track network rather than simply dead-ending at Penn Station as was proposed for the NJ Transit tunnel.

Featured Speaker

Colin Pease, Vice President for Special Operations at the Housatonic Railroad (HRRC), provided an overview of the market study done for the railroad to assess the feasibility of providing passenger service on the railroad's Berkshire Line between Danbury and Pittsfield. Housatonic first got interested in the concept of providing passenger service in western Connecticut about three years ago. Pease related a story about HRRC President John Hanlon looking at a location in Newtown 15 years ago and expressing his feeling that this would be a great location for someone to operate a lumber transload facility. Hanlon said this to himself so many times that finally he decided to buy the property and run such an operation there. He and Pease have the same gut feeling about the concept of passenger service on the Berkshire Line so they finally decided to go ahead with the study.

Housatonic met with the Berkshire Visitor's Bureau, the regional planning agencies and the first selectmen of corridor towns to gather data and obtain input on the market for such a service. Berkshire County attracts 2.5 million visitors annually, one million of them being from the New York City metro area. Pease noted that such statistics were much easier to come by in Massachusetts than in Connecticut. Additionally, John Hanlon noted that vans and buses were commonly at the Wassaic, NY train station to pick up or drop off students from prep schools in the area. These students,

who were taking the train home to NYC for the weekend, would be part of another segment of ridership, one that would not be reflected in the Visitor's Bureau statistics.

To develop its proposal for passenger service, HRRC would need to define the total market for such trips and then determine a capture rate of that market for passenger train service. Simple census original-destination data would not capture the second home market, the weekend trips by students or other potential ridership categories. Therefore, HRRC hired Market Street Research of Northampton, Mass., a firm which has done similar market studies for airline routes, to perform an analysis of the demand for passenger train service in this corridor.

Housatonic believes that any passenger service on the Berkshire Line can and should be done as a private business. Ninety percent of people in the market area will say that they are interested in rail passenger service. But how much will they pay for the service, how far will they travel to get to the train, and what level of service do they want? The Market Street Research survey, conducted in June of this year, surveyed people within 20 miles of the railroad in search of these answers.

Market Street Research's survey achieved a response rate of 12.9%. The median age of respondents was 36 years. Women represented 63.4% of the respondents. Of the respondents, 82.6% were employed, 92.3% had a driver's license, but only 60.2% owned a car. The disparity between the last two numbers represents the input of Manhattan residents and, to a lesser extent, those of other NYC boroughs. Although there was a greater demand for weekend travel, and for summer travel as compared to other seasons, there was a significant demand in all seasons, even in winter, and on weekdays as well as weekends. The purposes of the trips in the corridor were extremely varied. New York City was a very important market for train service demand, though there was no real preference expressed between Grand Central Terminal and Penn Station as an origination point. Bicycle access on the trains was seen as a desirable amenity with 48% of respondents listing this as either very important (14%) or somewhat important (34%) to them. There was substantial interest in train service for shorter trips, i.e., within Berkshire County and northwestern Connecticut, with 34% of respondents being very interested in using the train for such trips and 47% being somewhat interested.

Scaling up the survey results to the potential market as a whole, Market Street Research found that 350,000 to 400,000 people per year would use passenger service on the Berkshire Line and that these people would, in the aggregate, represent 2,000,000 trips annually.

Pease said that a better understanding of the market interest in Pittsfield is still needed and that a more accurate assessment of the New Milford to Danbury market is still to be obtained. However, even at this point, he feels confident that HRRC can operate this service without a subsidy.

The 90-mile line from Danbury to Pittsfield is under varying ownership. ConnDOT owns the line from New Milford to the Massachusetts state line, with

Housatonic operating under a lease on this segment. The railroad owns the tracks in Massachusetts and from New Milford south to Danbury. The rail station in Pittsfield is owned by the City of Pittsfield and sits on a CSX line, so some negotiations will be necessary there but Pease is confident that an arrangement can be reached.

In order to support passenger service, the affected track will need to be completely rebuilt, as a cost of \$1.2-1.3 million per mile. Passenger cars would need to be acquired and overhauled, as will locomotives. The passenger stations will need high level platforms and other improvements. The total capital costs are roughly estimated at \$200,000,000. The railroad can finance some of this but will need some help from ConnDOT and the State of Massachusetts.

One potential option for rolling stock is equipment that ConnDOT owns and has in storage at New Haven Yard. The department owns six FL-9 locomotives and about ten SPV-2000 coaches. This equipment is not currently used. It would be less expensive for HRRC to overhaul this equipment than to buy new equipment. The FL-9s could operate into Grand Central Terminal if through service to NYC was to be run. HRRC also owns 11 or 12 double deck gallery coaches which would also require refurbishment. They would offer better vantage points to view scenery from the upper deck, but these cars would not be able to access Grand Central Terminal or fit under the catenary if through service to New York were provided.

Most of the two million annual passengers for this service would be from New York City and would take Metro-North service from New York to Danbury. This would result in \$20,000,000 of new revenues for Metro-North, which would represent new free cash flow into Metro-North coffers since they are already running this service.

No regulatory approvals would be needed to operate the service. Three or four larger regional stations would be the principal passenger interfaces. Aside from the termini at Danbury and Pittsfield, New Milford is seen as a regional station and perhaps a fourth regional station at the state line on land the railroad already owns. Housatonic owns 14 acres at this state line location so this site could provide ample parking including perhaps long-term parking for owners of second homes in the area. Great Barrington would also be an important station for the Berkshire line service. In addition, the smaller local stations would also be stops on the train. To date, Pease has heard of no opposition to the passenger service proposal and said the idea has enjoyed universal support and enthusiasm from every official with whom he has spoken.

Comments from the Public

Terry Hall wishes to publically thank Gov. Rell for her efforts to expand and improve passenger rail service in Connecticut. He looks forward to similar success with the new administration.

Reports from Operating Entities

Richard Sunderhauf mentioned that a new offer from Connecticut Transit management was put forward three weeks ago. It was rejected by the rank and file. A

second management offer, extended on Thanksgiving Eve, will be put to a vote on Sunday.

Russ St. John reported that Providence and Worcester will be rebuilding the Willimantic Branch with 115# rail to replace the existing 80# rail on the line. One hundred and fifteen pound rail is good for FRA Class I and II freight services.

Chairman's Report

Chairman Maloney noted that today's Hartford Courant contained an article in which Transportation Committee Co-chairman Sen. Don DeFronzo questioned the value of proceeding with the New Britain Busway.

Maloney also received a two page letter from Todd O'Donnell as a follow-up to the Commission's public hearing in New London. Mr. O'Donnell, who is a co-owner of the New London train station, believes that an increase in Shore Line East service to New London could be accomplished without significantly impacting boaters. Maloney noted that testimony at this hearing indicated that the Shore Line East trains were running on a very predictable schedule but that it was the unpredictability of the Amtrak trains that caused problems for boaters because there was no certainty as to the timing of the bridge openings.

Discussion and Voting on Annual Report Recommendations

Fred Riese distributed copies of ten candidate recommendations for the 2010 Annual Report that had been developed as a result of discussions at the annual work session on Nov. 18. Eight of these recommendations dealing with the following topics were approved for inclusion in the Annual Report: bicycle amenities, timely provision of ConnDOT transit district support figures, support for the New Britain Busway, Wilton Station, ConnDOT's responses to the Commission's recommendations, improvements at the Waterbury train station, evening bus service in Waterbury, and state support of freight rail infrastructure. Two recommendations dealing with direct intermodal freight service from Chicago to Cedar Hill Yard and with expanded Shore Line East service to New London were not adopted for inclusion in the Annual Report.

Chairman Maloney adjourned the meeting at 4:14 pm.