

Connecticut Public Transportation Commission
Minutes of June 4, 2009

Connecticut Department of Transportation
2800 Berlin Turnpike, Newington
Conference Room B

Attendance: Members: Mort Katz, Kevin Maloney, Russ St. John, Rich Sunderhauf, Rick Schreiner, Yvonne Loteczka, Ed McAnaney, Kathleen Anderson, Gail Lavielle, Richard Carpenter, Alan Sylvestre. **Ex-officio members:** Susan Simmat (OPM), Fred Riese (DEP). **ConnDOT staff:** Michael Sanders, Dennis King, Sherry Osterling, Lisa Rivers, Maureen Lawrence. **Guests:** Terry Hall, Stephen Troster.

As Chairman Cheeseman was attending the Community Transportation Association of America convention in Providence, Vice-chairman Morton Katz opened the meeting at 1:30 pm. The minutes of the May 7 meeting were approved as written.

Featured Speaker

ConnDOT Administrator for Transit and Ridesharing Michael Sanders was the featured speaker for this meeting. He began his presentation by giving a detailed report on the development and current status of the New Britain Busway project. Sanders reported that 120 people had attended the two open houses ConnDOT hosted on the busway. He explained that the 9.4 mile busway project arose out of the Interstate 84 West Corridor Study and was selected as the locally preferred option from that study. It had the highest ridership and highest diversion of traffic from I-84 of any of the options in the corridor study. The busway also allowed for a higher frequency of service than any rail option, and is much less expensive than any highway option or installing light rail in the corridor. Currently, the busway is at the 60% design stage. ConnDOT will submit a formal New Starts Program application to FTA this fall. FTA gave the busway a 'Recommended' rating last month, based on last fall's evaluation, so the project is eligible for federal funding.

Sanders then provided some specifics about the busway. It will save 11 minutes average travel time for express buses coming into downtown Hartford as compared to traveling I-84. Shuttle buses will be added from the new Sigourney Station to St. Francis Hospital. Other shuttle buses from the line will serve West Hartford center and West Farms Mall. ConnDOT is looking at some additional shuttle routes to Newington and to the UConn Health Center. A new Bristol to New Britain bus will continue on the busway to downtown Hartford, and will also serve Plainville.

The project team is currently working on an operations plan to specify items like who will run the busway, who plows the snow, who maintains the stations, and who responds to emergencies. Much work has been done on station design. Ninety FTE people are working on the busway project currently. A full-funding grant agreement will be filed over the winter with an answer expected next spring. Although some small breakout contracts may happen sooner,

the main project schedule calls for groundbreaking maybe very late in 2010, but definitely by 2011.

Of the total project budget of \$570 million, construction accounts for \$270 million, or slightly less than half. Contingencies, inflation and project management account for much of the remainder.

Asked whether the busway would offer any travel time savings for trips to and from the Farmington Valley, Sanders said that no such time savings have been identified to date but that if some were, ConnDOT would certainly go after them.

Sanders noted that the department is currently one of the largest landowners in the Flatbush Avenue neighborhood, having purchased a couple of gas stations, a car wash and an auto dealer. Asked whether the project would be considered as 'shovel ready', Sanders said it would not, but that the department couldn't practically speaking spend money any faster on the project at the moment even if it had extra funds. In response to another question concerning legislative interest in pursuing a Waterbury to Hartford rail service, Sanders said ConnDOT is still open to studying this idea but it really serves a different market than the one the busway will serve.

Regarding equipment to operate on the busway, Sanders identified the following: 14 sixty foot articulated BRT style buses, four commuter coaches, nine 40' low floor transit buses and six 30' shuttle buses for the feeder routes. As currently envisioned, eleven existing bus routes in New Britain will be modified, six new feeder routes will be added, new service to/ from Waterbury will be added, four other express routes will be modified and five new local routes will be added.

Fare collection on the busway will be more like a subway system with fare payment done on the platform before boarding the buses. Stations will be unmanned; any ticket sales at the stations will be done through vending machines. The only enclosed station proposed is the downtown New Britain station.

The Federal Railroad Administration must still give its approval that the busway will not compromise the ability to offer high speed rail service in the Springfield Line corridor in the future. Consultants Wilbur Smith Associates has determined that a two track railroad with electrification is compatible with the busway. ConnDOT and Amtrak have their next modeling meeting on June 11 to study the compatibility of their operations. FRA also wants an assessment of whether sufficient capacity exists at Union Station to have four tracks in service there.

In answer to a question about the original corridor study and its findings, Sanders noted that the corridor study was done in 1999 and the environmental impact statement was completed in 2002. Fifteen thousand people per day are seen as using the busway for some portion of their trip. Four thousand of these people will be brand new trips to the system. New ridership numbers have undoubtedly gone up since the original study was done due to new service plans and the addition of the shuttle routes. Maintenance of the busway is seen as requiring \$200,000 per year, and \$7 million per year will be needed to operate the busway. A law change last year

will allow articulated buses under 65' to be operated in Connecticut but they must be rear-engined buses to comply with the law. The hours of operation of the busway will mimic the hours of operation of the rest of the transit system, perhaps 20 hours.

Sanders was asked if the rail study being advocated by Sen. Donald DeFronzo could hold up progress on the busway. Sanders said that it could. ConnDOT is trying to do a better job to reach out to legislators, perhaps including an educational session. The New Starts Program typically takes 14 years from conception to start-up. The New Britain Busway is on track to meet this schedule.

Moving on to non-busway questions, Sanders was asked about fuel cell and hybrid buses the department may acquire. He said four new fuel cell buses are coming in the next eight and a half months. They are Van Hool buses with UTC fuel cells. He noted that the batteries on the original fuel cell bus have not worked well and no one has been willing to take responsibility for them. The problems with the original fuel cells have been fixed but now there are problems with batteries and other issues. However, good skills are being developed in the maintenance personnel. New space will be needed for bus storage and fueling. We need to see improved reliability on the fuel cell buses before we can really count on them in revenue service. At a cost of \$2,000,000 per copy vs. \$400,000 for a commuter bus, the reliability factor really puts the fuel cell buses at a disadvantage. Hartford is the only location which experiences winter weather which is currently using a fuel cell bus. The fuel cell bus develops too much torque on slippery winter roads, causing the wheels to spin.

Two hybrid buses operating since 2003 now have six years of experience. Our experience with them has been good. Their batteries have lasted 2-5 years, rather than the 1-2 years predicted. As the batteries have performed better, the buses can draw on the battery power more often, resulting in a 20% improvement in fuel economy. Under the new Transit Investments for Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reductions or TIGGER program, more funding will be available for hybrid buses and for more refueling capacity. ConnDOT is looking at the former Tony March Buick property for fuel cell bus storage and refueling.

Lastly, Sanders was asked about the three Peter Pan buses which appeared a few months ago at the Hartford Division garage. Sanders explained that the state purchased those buses in 1983 and 1986 for the Greater Hartford Transit District, who then leased them to private operators to run some express service routes. These operators were allowed to use the buses for incremental charter service also. These were state-owned but privately-operated buses. Peter Pan ultimately operated some of these express routes and used the state-purchased buses. When Peter Pan took some of the buses out of service, they were returned to Connecticut Transit. They have now been rebranded with the Connecticut Transit Express logo. Five to seven more of these buses from DATTCO are likely to show up in the coming months.

Comments from the Public

Terry Hall reported that the Massachusetts Bay Railroad Enthusiasts group will run two trips on the Griffins Line this Saturday.

Stephen Troster asked if there were any plans to electrify the Springfield Line. Mike Sanders said that this was not in anybody's plans but that FRA requires that this option not be precluded by the busway design.

Reports from Operating Entities

Rich Sunderhauf reported that the ROADEO will be held this Sunday at the Buckland commuter lot.

Rick Schreiner participated in an inspection tour of potential station sites between Danbury and New Milford for the Danbury Branch Electrification Study. Eight potential station sites were visited for the Danbury North, Brookfield and New Milford stations.

Rick also reported that HART was designated as the CTAA's Urban Community Transportation System of the Year and was presented with this award at the CTAA's convention in Providence earlier this week.

Susan Simmat reported that the Transportation Strategy Board voted late last month to take a further look at the congestion pricing and VMT tolling options. No tolling recommendations will be forthcoming from the TSB at this time. The legislature is interested in looking at border tolls further, though this is not an option the TSB recommends. The legislature has asked ConnDOT to do a study of border tolls within available appropriations.

Old Business

Fred Riese reported on the extremely well attended Norwalk public hearing on May 23 and thanked Gail Lavielle for all the work she had put in to publicize that hearing and encourage a good turnout. The West Haven public hearing on June 2 had four speakers.

New Business

Gail Lavielle distributed copies of a letter to Commissioner Marie advocating expedited action to reopen Wilton Station on the Danbury Branch. The station has been closed since 2005. The level of repairs that are needed to reopen the station are relatively minor. Gail believes that reopening the station would buy the department much goodwill at a small cost and would help address commuter frustration in that portion of Fairfield County. A motion was made to send this letter to the Commissioner subject to some editing and condensing to be undertaken by Gail and Fred Riese. This motion was approved 10-0.

Russ St. John recommended that the Commission invite a speaker from Bradley Airport to a future meeting to address operational issues, management structure and future plans for the airport.

Dick Carpenter expressed his appreciation to Fourth District Congressman Himes for his request for \$1 billion in funding to advance the Cross-Harbor Tunnel study in New York. He also asked what had transpired relative to the ConnDOT study of rest areas and service plazas and asked if a speaker could be invited to address that effort.

The Commission meeting was adjourned at 3:45 PM.