

Connecticut Public Transportation Commission
Minutes of September 3, 2009

Legislative Office Building
Hearing Room 1-A
Hartford

Attendance: Members: Tom Cheeseman, Mort Katz, Russ St. John, Rich Sunderhauf, Yvonne Loteczka, Kathleen Anderson, Gail Lavielle, Chris Adams. **Ex-officio members:** Susan Simmat (OPM), Fred Riese (DEP). **ConnDOT staff:** Dennis King, Sherry Osterling. **Guests:** Gloria Mills, Terry Hall, John Boren.

Chairman Cheeseman opened the meeting at 1:37 pm. Susan Simmat introduced John Boren who is an intern in the Office of Policy and Management's Office of Transportation Policy.

Comments from the Public

Terry Hall mentioned that a New Haven Register article of August 25 described four rail-related stimulus projects in Connecticut. \$15,000,000 in stimulus money is slated for the signal system on the New Haven Line, money Terry speculated was for the new positive train control requirements. Reinstallation of the fourth track between New Haven and Milford will receive \$600,000. Design work and environmental planning for the new platforms at five Shore Line East stations at Branford, Guilford, Madison, Westbrook and Clinton will receive \$300,000. Lastly, \$41,000,000 will go toward double tracking the Springfield Line.

Featured Speaker

Gloria Mills, Executive Director of the Connecticut Association for Community Transportation, provided an overview of how public transportation fared in the recently-passed State budget. She cautioned that we are still waiting for the dust to settle on the budget and that some final wording is still to be developed.

The passed budget is in the form of Budget Bill 6802 as amended by Schedules A and C. Funding line items for bus transit as contained in Schedule C show \$121,368,445 for FY 2010 and \$129,005,985 for FY 2011, which represent reductions of \$3.59 million and \$3.95 million, respectively, from current levels. The budget does restore funding for the Section 13b-38bb State Dial-a-Ride matching grant program to the statutory level of \$5,000,000 per year. A general fare increase for bus systems appears to be in the budget but Mills said it is not yet clear what was finally passed.

Funding for ADA paratransit is unchanged from the levels proposed in Governor Rell's February budget proposal, which is \$23,826,375 in FY 2010 and \$25,565,960 in FY 2011. Non-ADA paratransit will receive \$576,361 each year to be divided among the Greater Hartford Transit District, the Greater New Haven Transit District, the Middletown Transit District and the Milford Transit District. ADA paratransit spending had exceeded its budget last fiscal year so funds were taken from non-ADA paratransit to cover the shortfalls. So it had been expected that non-ADA paratransit might be eliminated this year, but funding was added in at the last minute.

ADA fares will increase if there is a general bus fare increase since ADA fares are tied to the bus fare level.

Mills said that paratransit enhancements operated under the Section 13b-38bb State Matching Grant Program were starting to close down in many towns already due to a lack of funds. Mills also noted that Connecticut's aging population, with many residents over age 65, means there will be greater mobility needs on the horizon for our citizens.

Mills next referred to some statistics from the *Urban Mobility Report* prepared by the Texas Transportation Institute and released on July 8, 2009. For 2007, the average commuting time per employee nationwide was up by one hour for the year. The annual cost per employee of being stuck in traffic fell to \$700. The Texas Transportation Institute also prepares figures on the hours of traffic delay avoided annually in each metropolitan region due to the use of mass transit services. For the Greater Hartford region, the level of public transportation use saved 10 million hours of highway delay, representing a savings of \$203,000,000 in avoided costs. For the New Haven area, 5.7 million hours of delay time were avoided, saving \$117,000,000. For the Bridgeport-Stamford region, 16 million hours of delay were avoided because of transit use, saving \$350,000,000. These figures are all for 2007.

Mills put the budget picture in context by noting that the budget numbers mean that the shortfall in meeting public transportation needs in Connecticut will continue to widen. The new cuts follow on the November 2008 rescission of funds to expand transit services.

In response to a question about attracting more private capital to meet transportation infrastructure needs, Mills said there has been a lot of discussion on this topic but only limited results to date. Tom Cheeseman mentioned that FTA will be hosting a conference on public/private partnerships in transportation in Cambridge, Mass. on September 15-16.

Lastly, regarding the Section 13b-38bb State Matching Grant Program, Mills said there was \$1.9 million carried over from last year, so the new 2-year budget provided \$3.1 million for FY 2010 and \$5.0 million for FY 2011.

Approval of Minutes of August 6 Meeting

Richard Sunderhauf clarified a point in the August 6 minutes that during the time that bus service was provided on the Waterbury Branch during a track repair outage, all the Waterbury Branch stations were served by the replacement bus service but every bus did not stop at every station.

Mort Katz added that his absence from the August meeting was due to his participation at ceremonies marking the 65th anniversary of Operation Dragoon, the World War II invasion of southern France. This anniversary ceremony took place in Washington, D.C.

The minutes of the August 6 meeting were adopted subject to these clarifications.

Reports from Operating Entities

Russ St. John reported that the Providence and Worcester Railroad had just placed a new siding in Rocky Hill into service for a new customer there. On the negative side, the Smurfit Stone Container plant in Portland just shut down. This was a major customer for P&W's Middletown operation. Lastly, P&W is spending significant effort upgrading the interchange with the New England Central Railroad at the western end of P&W's Plainfield to Willimantic branch.

Chairman's Report

Chairman Cheeseman reported that Representative Rosa DeLauro continues to be interested in the concept of an infrastructure bank to finance transportation projects and other large infrastructure facilities. A federal study of this concept is underway, in part looking at the European model for such an institution.

Also, Tom reported that the Middletown Transit District will be closing on the property for its new garage in about two weeks. The property contains an existing structure which will be rehabilitated to serve as a vehicle garage, a process expected to take about one year.

Old Business

Kathleen Anderson asked about the status of the report on Wilton Station and the work necessary to reopen it. September 1st was the previously announced date when the report on the station would be submitted. Dennis King recommended that Chairman Cheeseman make a request for the report to the Department.

Morton Katz inquired about any efforts to pursue a change to the Commission's statute to reinstate the requirement that the Department provide responses to the recommendations of the Commission's Annual Report, as was done until last year. Chairman Cheeseman said he would look into the matter further but it may be best addressed though our next Annual Report.

New Business

Russ St. John reported that he recently took a trip to Churchill, Manitoba on Hudson Bay. He rode VIA Rail, Canada's equivalent of Amtrak, to reach Churchill. Hudson Bay Railroad owns the line and they shifted the VIA train to sidings several times to give 150-car grain trains the right-of-way.

Fred Riese reported that the September 1 public hearing in Storrs produced five speakers. A commuter express bus from Storrs to Hartford remains a top regional priority, as it was at last fall's Willimantic public hearing. Better bus service connections to serve Mansfield's senior housing complexes was also raised as an issue.

Gail Lavielle reported on a legislative hearing she attended on August 19th regarding the use of stimulus money for transportation projects. The three major issues of the hearing were:

- How much money did we get?
- Did we get all the money we could?
- Are we successfully creating jobs? (and why not?)

Connecticut received \$3 billion in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act money. Of this amount, \$480 million is for infrastructure projects, with \$450,000,000 of this for transportation and \$30,000,000 for water treatment projects. Only 6% of the stimulus money nationally went toward transportation projects. A further breakdown of the transportation funds shows that \$150,000,000 is being directed toward rail projects, including the Danbury Branch signal system and the New Haven Yard rail maintenance facility, with the remaining \$300,000,000 going toward highway projects. Ninety million dollars of the highway funds will be directed to projects selected by the Metropolitan Transportation Organizations (MPOs).

Lavielle reported that the Governor's office went after every available dollar of stimulus money. She also said ConnDOT did an excellent job at the hearing of explaining the process, issues and problems with the stimulus program.

The ARRA was passed in February. Federal guidance on the use of these funds was issued in April, and that guidance has since be refined and changed. Some of the federal requirements and procedures are not valid under Connecticut law. The federal bid requirements are much more restrictive and cumbersome than our state procedures. These issues have slowed the rate at which the stimulus funds are actually being put to work on projects. Lavielle also mentioned that much of the local stimulus money is actually provided on a reimbursement basis rather than as up-front grants.

ConnDOT will award more than \$1 billion in new contracts in 2009, including stimulus projects and programmed state-funded projects. Last year (2008), 26% of projects moved from bid opening to contract award in less than sixty days. In 2009, 74% of ConnDOT projects will meet this timeframe.

Moving on to another topic, Gail observed that most of the Commission's public hearings have not been well attended. She expressed that the Commission needs to do a better job to get the word out on the hearings. A simple legal notice does not suffice. One measure she recommends is a public notice early in the year explaining the purpose of the hearings and giving the full schedule for the hearings. This should be posted on the Commission's web site and also should go out to all the regional planning agencies. Chairman Cheeseman indicated he would like to meet to discuss these ideas further.

The Commission meeting was adjourned at 2:54 PM.