

Connecticut Public Transportation Commission
Minutes of November 6, 2008

ConnDOT Headquarters, 2800 Berlin Turnpike, Conference Room B
Newington

Attendance: Members: Tom Cheeseman, Morton Katz, Chris Adams, Terry Hall, Kevin Maloney, Richard Sunderhuf, Richard Schreiner, Yvonne Loteczka, Alan Sylvestre, Russ St. John, John Zelinsky, Edward McAnaney. **Ex-officio members:** Connie Mendolia (DEP), Frederick Riese (DEP). **DOT Staff:** Dennis King, Dennis Jolly. **Guests:** Douglas Holcomb, Stephen Troster.

Chairman Cheeseman opened the meeting at 1:30 pm. The minutes of the meeting of October 2, 2008 were accepted as written.

Featured Speaker

Douglas Holcomb, Director of Planning at the Greater Bridgeport Transit Authority, provided an overview of the Authority's new bus terminal and then discussed the operations of the bus system. The new Bridgeport bus terminal opened in September 2007 and is an element of the larger Bridgeport Intermodal Transportation Center which also includes the ferry terminal and the New Haven Line rail station. The bus terminal is immediately north of the Bridgeport train station. The terminal provides 10,000 square feet of space and includes the bus garage, the indoor waiting areas, office space, a community room, pedestrian connections to the train station, and 17 outdoor bus berths with protective canopies for passengers. Two of these 17 berths are used by Peter Pan/Greyhound for intercity buses. The facility cost \$26.25 million to construct. The Boston Society of Architects awarded its 2008 Design Award for Excellence to the bus terminal. The information booth at the terminal is staffed from 6 AM to 6 PM, Monday through Friday.

Previous to the opening of the new terminal on September 2, 2007, the Authority's bus system operated out of the Middle Street Garage. This facility had been owned by the City of Bridgeport and was leased to the GBTA for \$1.00 per year. When the City sold the garage to a private owner, the lease rental went to \$3,000 per month, then \$6,000 per month, and finally \$9,000 per month.

The new facility is owned by the City of Bridgeport but managed by the GBTA under a 25 year lease. The Authority does the contracting for the Peter Pan/ Greyhound operations and for security, cleaning, etc. The annual operating budget of the terminal is \$596,000.

The route system operated by GBTA consists of 15 local bus routes and two express bus runs. Ninety percent of the population of Bridgeport lives within 1,300 feet of one of these routes. The bus system carries 18,000 riders on an average weekday. Service runs generally from 5 AM to 11 PM, 365 days per year. GBTA is one of the

operators of the Coastal Link service from Norwalk to Milford and carries 100,000 passengers per month on this service.

When the new terminal opened, one of the complaints from the public concerned the lack of a Dunkin' Donuts or Subway in it. Such facilities were contemplated but were not in place when the station was opened. Dunkin' Donuts will be opening a counter in the terminal by year's end. Another complaint concerned the design of the canopies at the bus berths. They proved to provide less protection in blowing rain than was anticipated. To remedy this, new glass enclosures with heat will be added at locations along the berths.

Twelve protective wind screens (6' x 12') are also incorporated into the terminal design. These wind screens include permanent art related to local transportation themes. A bike rack shaped like a bluefish, themed for the Bridgeport Bluefish which play at nearby Harbor Yard, is also provided at the station.

The next element to be tackled is the advanced communications system which will track the locations of all buses and notify riders at each stop as to when the next bus will arrive. A mini-fleet of buses with this system will be tested on routes 1, 8, 9, 17, and 18 to see how well the system works.

At the time the bus system moved into the new station, the whole route system was updated and reconfigured. Ridership on the GBTA system took an 8-9% hit as a result of the changes in the routes. This was larger than the 3-4% drop that was expected. It took a while for ridership to recover but now ridership is running well ahead of last year. For October 2008, ridership was up 15% above October 2007, even with the recent fare increase having gone into effect. Holcomb reported that usage of the bike racks has gone up also.

The two express bus routes operated by GBTA are of a reverse commute nature, running from Downtown Bridgeport to the former Oxford Health complex in Monroe and the Trap Falls Road/ Commerce Park area in Shelton.

The immediate needs of the GBTA bus system are for more frequent service to alleviate overcrowding on the buses. GBTA's \$380,000 portion of the \$5,000,000 slated for transit that was in the Governor's recision package would have been used to cut headways from one hour to one half hour on the most heavily used routes. There are some improvements that can be made with existing equipment but for more substantial upgrades, additional vehicles would be needed.

The recent fare increase placed the GBTA base fare fifty cents above other transit systems in the state. Nonetheless, at the fare increase public hearing, only five percent of the comments were fare-related; the vast majority of the comments were requests for service improvements. GBTA's farebox recovery ratio will reach 40% next month, when the fare increase has been fully in effect.

Comments from the Public

None.

Reports from Operating Entities

Rick Schreiner of HART reported that ridership continues to grow on the Harlem Line shuttles and the Route 7LINK. Ridership on the Danbury-Brewster shuttle increased 19% for October to 8,050 riders. Ridership on the Ridgefield-Katonah shuttle was up 23% to 4,902 riders. On the Route 7LINK service between Norwalk and Danbury, ridership was up 10% to 5,924.

Fred Riese reported that the second meeting of the advisory committee for the New London Intermodal Transit Facility took place October 21 at New London City Hall. The downtown location was selected as the project site over the Fort Trumbull Peninsula location. Much user survey data has been gathered to learn how travelers access each mode of transportation, what intermodal connections they make or desire to make, whether downtown New London is the destination for a trip or merely a point of connection, and what the purposes of trips to downtown New London are.

The second meeting of the Waterbury and New Canaan Branch Line study advisory committee took place October 21 at Bridgeport City Hall Annex. Riese reported that study is in the stage of gathering background data to prepare for looking at options to upgrade service on these lines. For the Waterbury Branch in particular, a very wide range of options will be studied including bus service on Route 8 instead of train service, bus service on a dedicated BRT facility, electrification of the line, partial electrification to the area of Route 15, alignment modifications, sidings, double tracking, station improvements, and the installation of a signal system and automated switches on the line.

Riese gave brief reports on the Willimantic and Danbury public hearings. The Willimantic public hearing was extremely well attended with 12 or 13 speakers, all voicing support for improved bus connections from Willimantic and Storrs to Hartford. The main issue at the Danbury public hearing was improvement of Danbury Branch service, especially by extending service to New Milford.

Dennis Jolly of ConnDOT introduced himself to the Commission and related that his chief responsibilities were in the areas of taxi and livery regulation.

Richard Sunderhauf noted that changes to the Connecticut Transit bus schedule in the Hartford Division go into effect on November 16. More bus routes will be converted from letter designations to numbers. The Windsor Avenue bus route will be extended to the new Walgreen's Distribution Center in Windsor. Significant changes are being made to the Asylum Hill Loop and Capitol Loop bus schedules. Minor time adjustments are being made on several other routes.

Russ St. John mentioned that Frank Rogers, Providence and Worcester's Vice President for Marketing, would be available to speak at a Commission meeting in early 2009. He also mentioned that the first autorack train from the west coast has now arrived

at Providence. The train carried Volkswagen's assembled in Mexico to Volkswagen's regional facility at Davisville, Rhode Island for installation of radios and other options. Volkswagen assembles the basic models in Mexico and then adds the options at various regional facilities. This train transited the recently enlarged Bellows Falls Tunnel in Vermont and the recently reopened Willimantic to Versailles line of the Providence and Worcester. Russ also reported that the shipment of used cars to Africa is a growing business. New Haven is a point at which used cars are loaded onto boats for shipment to Africa.

Chairman's Report

Tom Cheeseman said that it was disappointing to see the \$5,000,000 for transit enhancements was included in the governor's package of recisions but there is hope that those funds will be restored in 2010. It will be difficult to accommodate the increased transit demand without this funding.

Old Business

John Zelinsky asked that the minutes reflect that his absences from the October and September meetings were due to a medical point and car repairs, respectively.

Terry Hall noted that the Rail Passenger Improvement and Investment Act which he mentioned last meeting as having been passed by the Senate, has subsequently been passed by the House and signed by President Bush. Passage of this legislation was largely as a result of the recent fatal train accident in southern California. This legislation will specify standard safety measures, including the use of positive train control systems, at locations where passenger and freight systems or multiple passenger systems interact.

New Business

Kevin Maloney read an article from the Hartford Business Journal relating problems that have been experienced with the hydrogen fuel cell bus being operated in Hartford. These problems include, "the degradation of the hydrogen fuel cells, battery integration, heating and air conditioning systems, maximum speed and operating in slippery conditions". These problems have reduced the overall availability of the bus for service from the target of 85% to only 54% availability. Further, the bus was reported as requiring nine times the amount of maintenance as a standard diesel bus as well have having 17.6% greater operating costs. The article noted that a similar bus operating in Belgium is being limited to a maximum speed limit of 48 mph because of stability concerns caused by the top-heavy weight distribution because of the hydrogen tanks being located in the roof of the bus. UTC Fuel Cells is working on all of these issues.

Chris Adams noted the opening of a new park and ride lot in Essex. One positive feature of the lot is the very ample lighting provided, but on the other end of the spectrum, he noted the lack of any bicycle facilities.

Fred Riese reminded members of the annual work session coming up on November 20 at Union Station in New Haven, beginning at 5 pm. He asked members to prepare any draft recommendations for the annual report and bring them to the work

session. Riese also enquired whether ConnDOT has experienced the problems that some other transit systems around the country are experiencing with banks asking for large balloon payments to cover the value of assets involved in sale and lease-back arrangements that were entered into several years ago. Like other transit entities, ConnDOT entered into such arrangements whereby private entities bought locomotives, rail cars and buses in order to realize the tax advantages of depreciating these assets. The assets were then leased back to the transit entities. Many of these assets were insured by AIG. When AIG cancelled these policies recently, the owning entities asked for the remaining lease payments to be made in one balloon payment, leaving the transit agencies with multi-million dollars obligations. No one at the meeting had heard that ConnDOT was encountering any such difficulties.

Terry Hall mentioned seeing a prototype light rail streetcar in Portland, Oregon while he was at a National Association of Railroad Passengers meeting in that city. Many participants at the NARP meeting toured the manufacturing facilities of Oregon Iron Works where the prototype, based on a design by Skoda, is being developed. Portland plans to use this design of cars for its light rail system.

On a related note, John Zelinsky mentioned that the City of Stamford has just approved funding of \$141,000 to investigate the feasibility of a light rail street car system in its downtown area.

Chairman Tom Cheeseman remarked that the Commission's recent Willimantic public hearing was well attended and that the attendees had obviously done their homework. He complimented Kevin Maloney on the job he did as hearing moderator.

Yvonne Loteczka asked Dennis Jolly if taxi companies will be required to have some handicapped accessible vans available. Dennis said the department had submitted legislative proposals to the end last session but they were not approved. But there is an on-going study of the taxi and livery businesses by the Legislature's Program Review and Investigations Committee

Doug Holcomb mentioned that the LOCHSTP process allows regional planning agencies to allocate some Section 5310 funds to procure accessible vehicles in a region if it so desires. Under the New Freedoms Program, the Greater Bridgeport Region has \$260,000 per year available to allocate. So far no region has chosen to use their funds for accessible vehicles, but they could do so if they chose. Yvonne expressed that the availability of such vehicles is very important because it would allow handicapped riders to get to locations not served by bus service or to travel on holidays or other occasions when bus service is curtailed or unavailable.

Kevin Maloney mentioned that he attended a meeting at the Department of Labor recently where the taxi driver issue came up out of the clear blue. The DOL position on this question is that the employment status of the taxi drivers as private

contractors in many systems does not relieve the taxi companies of their obligations as employers or give them immunity for regulation as employers.

Dennis Jolly noted that the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee did hold a hearing on the taxi and livery regulation study in June and will hold a second hearing on this study in December.

Chairman Cheeseman adjourned the meeting at 2:52 pm.