

Waterbury and New Canaan Branch Lines Needs and Feasibility Study

Public Information Meeting

Tuesday, June 16, 2009

6:00 – 8:00 PM

Waterbury Development Corporation
Brass City Room, 2nd Floor
24 Leavenworth Street, Waterbury, CT

Attendance

Advisory Committee Members and Public who signed in: 28 in attendance

Connecticut Department of Transportation Staff:

Andrew H. Davis Intermodal Planning,
David Head Intermodal Planning
Anna Bergeron Intermodal Planning

Consultant Team:

Elizabeth Federico Parsons Transportation Group
Nick LaRocco Parsons Transportation Group
Bhoomi Vala Parsons Transportation Group
Mike Morehouse Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc.
Leslie Black Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc.

Meeting Summary

Welcome and Opening Comments

Mr. Andrew Davis welcomed everyone to the first of three Waterbury and New Canaan Branch Lines Needs and Feasibility Study Public Information Meetings. He thanked the Waterbury Development Corporation for use of the Brass City Room for the meeting. He outlined the agenda for the presentation and emphasized the importance of the question and comment period that would follow the presentation to hear from the public regarding the alternatives presented. He then turned the presentation over to Ms. Elizabeth Federico from Parsons Transportation Group.

Ms. Federico discussed the study process and thanked the Study Advisory Committee for their diligence in this important initiative. The Study Advisory Committee is comprised of a variety of federal, state, and local agencies, as well as local elected officials, community groups, and key stakeholders.

Presentation

Ms. Federico discussed the public process further. In addition to Study Advisory Committee meetings, Ms. Federico outlined the various methods of public outreach including a mailing list, comment forms, and a study website where meeting notices and study documents are made available: www.waterbury-newcanaanrail.org. The presentation from this meeting will be available on the website. The study website also provides a comment form under “Contact Us” to receive feedback regarding the study. All public comments will be incorporated into the study process as it moves forward.

Ms. Federico then presented a PowerPoint presentation of the study progress to date reviewing a long list of alternatives under consideration for the Waterbury branch line. She commented that tonight's meeting was an opportunity to hear the public's feedback on the draft alternatives, which are still conceptual in nature at this point in time. Public input is critical to making sure the alternatives are what the community wants to see in the future.

The study team then opened the meeting to the public audience to take questions and comments.

Public Question and Comment Period:

General Comments:

- Is there anything that can be implemented right now to help improve public transportation on the Waterbury branch line? *Short term improvements such as a shuttle bus service could be implemented to fill gaps in the system. Further environmental study (an Environmental Impact Statement – EIS) would be required for larger, more complex long-term project recommendations such as building a new station or double-tracking the entire line.*
- Consider public outreach tools for EJ populations such as those available on the Morgan State University website.
- Survey area employers such as UBS and RBS and people who drive to White Plains to hear from people who want to ride the train, but do not because of lack of service.
- Survey weekend ridership for input; those trains are full as well.
- Waterbury is a diverse, transit-dependent population. We need service improvements yesterday and will need them tomorrow as well.
- How do people missing from this meeting or do not have computers get involved? How are the voices of transit-dependent individuals heard?
- Public transportation is a civil right for all Americans. There are transit-dependent residents on the branch line who currently are denied access and service, and this situation must be remedied.
- Do not raise transit fees until we get better service.
- Build it and people will come. Reduce gaps in service. Provide return service in the early evening. Ridership will increase as a result if commuters know they can get to and from work by rail.
- Waterbury branch line gets the “short end of the stick” compared to other branch lines and the service provisions made for them. Waterbury should be ahead of the other branch lines in terms of being studied.
- Are there other options, aside from FTA funding, to get improvements done sooner?
- There are no members from the Connecticut Rail Commuter Council in attendance tonight!
- Can this plan be fast-tracked through the legislature if the study is completed in the next 6 months?
- This is the first opportunity that the public has had to be heard.
- Area employers should be surveyed.
- “Ridership” is not a good criterion to measure the usability of the transit for the Waterbury branch line because by cutting down the mid-day service, the transit authority has turned down a good number of transit riders.

Current Service Comments:

- Currently, when rail service is disrupted, bus service is implemented. The quality of transportation provided is not adequate; restroom facilities are not available on the bus, and it is a 27-mile ride, very difficult for young children or elderly people to make the trip in comfort. This is an unacceptable replacement service for that length of ride.
- If passing siding additions and signalization improvements were made, freight and passenger service could co-exist simultaneously on the branch line.
- Make sure passing sidings are long enough to accommodate freight.
- Senator Joan Hartley noted that the transportation system is on life support and that Waterbury is the fifth largest city in the state. Do not use current ridership as a measure of the viability of the Waterbury branch line when the lack of service keeps potential riders away. What can be done now to clean up rail cars and stations, and improve security for parking? Add some rebuilt trains on the Waterbury branch and then measure ridership once adequate service is provided.
- Clean the services that are currently provided.
- Security in the Waterbury parking lot has improved recently with the increased presence of both MTA and Waterbury police.

Bus Transit Services Comments:

- Can Federal economic stimulus funds be used to purchase shuttle buses for the Waterbury branch line to fill rail service gaps? ***Mr. Davis responded that the stimulus funds can only be used for capital expenses; it cannot be used for operations funding.***
- “Pulse transfers” refers to bus service timed to meet trains in a coordinated transfer service with little wait time.
- A suggestion was made to provide train service at peak times and shuttle bus service at off-peak times to supplement the rail service. Route 8 gets congested at peak travel times but is otherwise open for bus travel in off-peak times.
- Can we have buses in the meantime while other opportunities are being studied? Shuttles are a short-term fix.
- Sam Gold from the Council of Governments of Central Naugatuck Valley liked the idea of additional buses to supplement service gaps and suggested that it may be the first solution. ***Mr. Davis added that shuttle buses to fill service gaps could be the first of several phases of improvement recommendations.***
- Mr. Gold added that corridor maintenance issues need to be addressed, as the single-track branch line has to shut be down when maintenance is performed.
- Would shuttle bus service use the same type of vehicle that is currently used to transport passengers when the train breaks down? Using regular inner city buses, as is done when train service is halted due to repairs, is not acceptable for a 27-mile commute as there are no bathroom facilities on the bus for young families or the elderly.
- Replacing existing rail service with Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) is not seen as an improvement in service.
- Who would be responsible for LRT operations if that alternative were selected? ***A new agency would have to be established to be responsible for LRT operations.***

Commuter Rail Comments:

- Where would the trains from Devon Station go? *Mr. Davis and Ms. Federico responded that passengers from the Waterbury Branch trains could transfer to the New Haven Line trains to reach destinations such as Stamford and New Haven.*
- A request was made for more direct trains from Waterbury to Stamford. The Waterbury area will attract more residents and development if rail commuting options are expanded. *The restriction to providing more through service from Waterbury to Stamford is the availability of schedule slots for trains on the main line. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) has plans for Amtrak expansion and Metro-North Railroad also has expansion plans. An alternative for a new station at Devon would make it possible to operate more trains from Waterbury to Devon, allowing passengers to transfer to a greater number of New Haven Line trains. Current service from Waterbury to main line destinations like Stamford could still be maintained under this alternative.*
- Waterbury Station used to function better and be very busy; it is not even open to the public now.
- Consider running diesel trains with third rail capability that could go right to Grand Central Terminal.
- Why don't Waterbury riders deserve more slots on the main line? Waterbury line riders should not have lesser quality service. There should be through-service to Grand Central Terminal.
- Clean trains would help the commuting experience be more pleasant and would improve ridership.
- Consider adding a fifth main line track to extend Waterbury branch line to Stratford and avoid entry onto the main line. Then passengers could transfer at Stratford onto the main line towards Stamford/GCT, or reverse commute to New Haven.
- Can a six-car train service from Stamford be provided for evening run up the branch line to improve capacity?
- Can a train originating in Derby-Shelton in the AM inbound peak be considered to improve service and capacity?
- Could a track from Waterbury to Hartford be considered? *The scope of the current study is limited to the existing Waterbury branch line corridor.*
- The existing train service is not viable for people who work in Manhattan and live along Waterbury branch corridor due to infrequent service.
- In order to build a successful transit system for the Waterbury Branch Line, the trains or transit system will have to service the Stamford Station.
- What percentage of the rail traffic is freight? Does passenger service take precedence over freight? How would new sidings or double tracking affect the balance of passenger service versus freight service? *Both freight and passenger service needs to coexist. FRA does not prioritize one over the other.*
- Passenger trains should be a priority over freight trains.
- When the catenary system on the New Haven Line is being worked on, does entire track go out of service? *No, only section that is under repair is taken out of service and trains are switched to other tracks.*
- Study should consider starting a train in Waterbury instead of Bridgeport and utilize the existing main line slot to Stamford and NY.
- What is the current capacity on the New Haven Line? *Schedule slots are essentially filled up, but capacity can be added by increasing the number of cars per train. Infrastructure improvements such as platform extensions would likely be necessary.*

- Take a look at double tracking the entire Waterbury line.
- You can put passing sidings in Ansonia and Naugatuck right now!
- Is there a bigger rail maintenance project planned beyond the stop-gap improvements that are currently on-going?
- The Devon Station concept is a ridiculous waste of money. We need more trains on the mainline.
- The DOT should order more train sets.

Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Comments:

- TOD is very important when considering potential ridership. Also, infill sites in the cities should be considered for TOD, not just undeveloped parcels.
- One of the study objectives is increasing ridership, but for many residents on the line, the TOD aspect is very important and would impact the number of people willing to live here and commute.
- There are existing stations with large parcels that could provide TOD opportunities; Waterbury should also be looked at with respect to existing conditions/existing buildings and how to better develop downtown and the vicinity of the Waterbury Station – this would be a large factor in improving ridership. *The study will identify TOD opportunities. Towns will need to be proactive to push for TOD funding to develop the parcels.*
- What are the next steps after the study is complete? *Once the study is completed, recommendations that can be implemented without further environmental study will go to the legislature for funding. For more complex alternatives, a Federal environmental study may be required to secure FTA funding.*

The formal presentation adjourned at 7:50 p.m. to permit the public to return to the open house stations to view study maps and speak with the study team. The open house stations included:

1. Study process
2. Existing conditions
3. Alternatives for signal and track modifications
4. Alternatives for electrification
5. Alternatives for double-tracking
6. Alternatives for passing sidings
7. Alternatives for stations – new and existing
8. Other modes - transit, bicycle/pedestrian access