

State DOT looking at commuter rail line

By Ed Stannard
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NEW HAVEN — Sometime in the next decade, you may be able to get on a train in Madison or Milford to go to Bradley International Airport.

That's one of the conveniences envisioned by the state Department of Transportation with a proposed commuter rail line connecting New Haven, Hartford and Springfield, Mass.

Including the connecting bus services, riders would be able to take mass transit to numerous points throughout the state, including the airport.

The DOT's consultant, Wilbur Smith Associates, laid out the preliminary plans for the rail line for about 30 leaders of numerous state and federal agencies, regional planners and transportation services Tuesday at Union Station.

The state is in the midst of its environmental assessment and will hold public hearings over the next two weeks in Springfield, Hartford, Windsor and North Haven. The last of this round will be held at 6 p.m. Dec. 16 at North Haven Memorial Library, 17 Elm St.

Ralph Trepal, regional vice president of Wilbur Smith, presented two alternatives:

- A startup plan, which would include 12 stations, 18 miles of new double track and trains running every 30 minutes during peak hours.

- A "full build" plan, which would add a 13th station, double track on 20 additional miles, completing the 62-mile line, and peak-hour trains running every 15 minutes.

The idea of trains rolling through central Connecticut every 15 minutes elicited an objection from Judy Gott, executive director of the South Central Regional Council of Governments, who said her 15-town agency did not want such frequent service, which would interrupt car traffic in places where roads crossed the tracks. There are five such crossings in Wallingford alone.

"Our region ... is definitely affected by this," Gott said. "You can't expect these communities to tolerate" the increased train traffic. She said COG has gone on record favoring 30-minute service.

Cynthia S. Holden, transportation assistant planning director for DOT, said the start-up alternative may end up being adequate. "We want to make sure we look at both alternatives equally," she said after the meeting. "All we want to do is be fair in the whole process."

Peter Richter, DOT assistant rail administrator, pointed out that the agency holds such meetings "to elicit comment about your plan's scope ... but you got to start someplace."

Stephen Delpapa, transportation supervising planner for the DOT, said commuters can look forward to riding the new line in "optimistically, 2015-2016." Before that can happen, the environmental assessment must be done, complete with public input, and the project must be designed and built.

The startup plan was estimated to cost \$300 million in a 2005 study, and officials acknowledged that the cost would be higher now, with raw materials costing more and an additional station planned in Hartford since then. Three other new stations are included in the plan, in North Haven, Newington and Enfield. In the full-build plan, a 13th station at the former Pratt & Whitney property in North Haven would be added. A major mixed-use development on that site has been put on hold because of the weak economy.

Other work that needs to be done is laying new tracks where there is only a single line now, making sure passengers will not have to cross the tracks, inspecting bridges, and adding parking and bus lines.

A Web site, www.nhhsrail.com, has been launched with a link to the 2005 study and other documents.

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