



## Report of Meeting

**Date & Time:** December 9, 2008

**Location:** Union Station, Hartford

**Subject:** New Haven-Hartford-Springfield Rail Public Scoping Meeting

**Attendees:**

See attached list.

**Transactions and Determinations:**

Ralph Trepal of Wilbur Smith Associates (WSA) introduced himself, the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) staff present at the meeting, and reviewed the agenda for the evening. Mr. Trepal noted that an Implementation Plan for the rail line from New Haven to Springfield was completed in 2005 and the Environmental Assessment is the next step to move the project forward. The public scoping meetings are required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and are designed to get people's feedback on the scope of the Environmental Assessment. He encouraged people to express their concern about what should be looked at from an impact standpoint and to comment on whether or not WSA is reviewing all the appropriate criteria. He further stated that it was important to develop a consensus concerning a show of public support for the project. This will enhance the funding possibilities to allow the project to enter the design phase and eventually the construction phase. He noted that the general conclusions of the Implementation Plan showed that commuter rail would be beneficial to the region, the general public is in favor of the idea, and that commuter rail service is feasible. The Implementation Study further recommended that two build alternatives, a Start Up Service and a Full Build service, be studied in the environmental assessment. The environmental assessment is expected to take approximately two years in total and is anticipated to be completed in early 2010. There are 62 miles of rail corridor, which traverses thirteen municipalities. During the course of the presentation and subsequent comment period, the following was discussed:

- Molly McKay of the Sierra Club questioned the timing of the headways. Mr. Trepal responded that the current schedule for the start up service calls for 30-minute peak period headways in the morning and afternoon and two-hour headways southbound during the off-peak hours of operation and one to two hour headways northbound during the off-peak hours of operation. He also

indicated that the study is looking at potentially shifting the five daytime freight services to overnight service.

- Future ownership of the corridor was questioned. Steve Delpapa, ConnDOT, indicated that the State has been discussing ownership of the corridor with Amtrak for years. Mr. Trepal indicated that WSA would be looking at ownership as part of the Environmental Assessment.
- In response to a question regarding the capacity of the infrastructure, Mr. Trepal responded that all freight services would be maintained and that, since the line is designated as a military route, all the necessary clearances associated with that designation would be maintained. In addition, moveable platforms and gauntlet tracks are being reviewed, so that extra wide loads will be able to utilize the corridor, if it is necessary as part of the Strategic Network (for National defense purposes.)
- Concern was raised over the timing of the project. It was noted that the New Britain-Hartford Busway was supposed to begin service in 2004 and it is now scheduled for 2010. The progress on the rail initiative was questioned given the State's history of not completing projects on time. Cynthia Holden, ConnDOT, responded that the Environmental Assessment process is scheduled to be done by February 2010 and that the design process could take as long as three years. This assumes money is in place for the design, and currently there is no funding designated for the design phase. Funding is also not in place for construction, which could take an additional three to five years after the design process is completed.
- A concern was raised that the maximum impacts of the train service are not evident during the average day. It was noted that during Thanksgiving, the activity at Hartford's Union station was so intense that it disrupted the ability for buses to make turns, as well as, forcing drivers to drop off passengers in dangerous situations. Mr. Trepal responded that it was a good comment and that the impacts during holidays would be taken into consideration; however, it might be inappropriate to design something for an event that occurs only at specific times during the year.
- The opportunity to secure some of the infrastructure funding being proposed by the incoming Obama administration was discussed and whether or not this project could take advantage of that funding. Ms. Holden stated that the funding being proposed may not be for design. The State is looking at a number of projects which are shovel ready and that can immediately take advantage of any funding that would be made available.

- There was considerable discussion and concern over the length of time that the process was taking. It was requested that ConnDOT look at decreasing the time for the process and questioned whether or not the project could be staged to get the trains running faster. Ms. Holden noted that staging was a possibility, but the most difficult part of the project was getting the funding. The cost estimate in the 2005 study was \$300 million and this did not include bridge work. ConnDOT is working with Amtrak to get information on the condition of the bridges. Mr. Delpapa stated that the environmental assessment is 100 percent state-funded and the completed document is the vehicle that the federal agencies use to trigger the possibility of securing any federal funding for design and construction.
- It was noted that the 2005 Implementation Plan did not identify any real environmental concerns and it was questioned whether any significant environmental concerns have been found to date. Mr. Trepal responded that nothing of significance was uncovered, but the investigations were ongoing.
- Several suggestions were made regarding the need to speed up the process and whether the Full Build analysis would take longer than the Start Up analysis. Mr. Trepal replied both the Start Up and Full Build take about the same amount of time and it would not make sense to do just an analysis of the Start Up.
- It was questioned whether the trains could get up and running in advance of building the stations. Mr. Delpapa replied that ConnDOT is talking to Amtrak about this at the present time. It is possible that more Amtrak trains may be added in an effort to increase the level of service.
- The track layout chart shows a figure of 80 miles per hour and it was questioned whether the trains could achieve that speed. Mr. Trepal replied that the 80 mile per hour figure shown on the chart was a design speed. An Amtrak engineer in the audience stated that not only would it be possible to get the trains to 80 miles per hour, but they currently reach that speed along certain portions of the corridor.
- It was noted that the full build alternative is not eliminating any at grade crossings at the present time. One participant recommended that at grade crossings should be eliminated along the entire line. He felt that it would be appropriate to spend the money to elevate and depress the tracks to make it safer and to have less congestion. Mr. Trepal replied that it was a good comment, but it was also a matter of how much money was available.
- A question was raised concerning the earliest the Environmental Assessment could be completed, given the National Environmental Policy Act

requirements. Ms. Holden responded that it was anticipated the process would take until early 2010 for completion and approval.

- The level of environmental review in the 2005 Implementation Plan was questioned. Andy Davis of ConnDOT replied that there was minimal environmental analysis in the 2005 Implementation Plan. It was noted that the Implementation Plan only defined the alternatives and was a study that was mandated by the State Legislature.
- It was noted that a topic of conversation at the Enfield Multi-Modal Facility meeting on 12/8/08 concerned the rail project and when service would be started. It was requested that the timing issues be dealt with in a pro-active manner and that ConnDOT be creative in finding ways to accelerate the process. This concern was discussed at some length. The issues of funding, bureaucracy during the approval process, and ways of expediting the review were discussed. It was requested that the State make the case to the politicians and agencies in Washington, DC that the process by which these types of projects are reviewed should be revised.
- It was felt that transportation is the heart of community revitalization and delays in this process makes Smart Growth initiatives dead in the water. It was suggested that we are in a crisis mode and a project like this should be fast-tracked. It was requested that the environmental assessment not only look at the impacts on the environment, but also the opportunities around each station. Toni Gold, Hub of Hartford, noted that one group is currently looking at “disappearing” I-84 in Hartford and the opportunities for development this would present. Ms. Gold said that WSA must look at the opportunities at each station and questioned if there was enough funding to really look at TOD in a comprehensive manner. Mr. Trepal responded that TOD is one component of the project and that WSA will be coordinating with each municipality to make sure that the efforts support each other.
- The commuter service will run between New Haven and Springfield. Passengers who want to go from Hartford to New York City will have to change trains in New Haven as they currently do. There are no current plans to electrify the New Haven-Hartford-Springfield corridor.
- The Pioneer Valley Action Council wants to see the project extended to North Hampton. It was noted that this was beyond the scope of the project. Mr. Davis of ConnDOT said that there had been preliminary talks with ConnDOT’s counterparts from Massachusetts, but it does not look promising for this to happen.

- It was suggested that the electrification should go as far as the old Pratt & Whitney parking lot.
- Mr. Davis noted that the service will have to fit into the existing Metro-North and Shore Line East schedules and not modify the existing schedules in order to implement this proposed commuter rail service.
- The financial projections in the 2005 implementation plan were questioned. It was noted that these projections were done in 2005. Ms. Holden suggested that the inflation factor will have to be looked at to see what updated costs would now be.
- The anticipated fare for the New Haven-Hartford-Springfield service is expected to be similar to that of the Shore Line East service. Preliminary reviews were done and this seems to make sense. It was noted that Shoreline East subsidy from the State is about \$20 per ticket.
- In response to a question about political opposition to the funding, Ms. Holden noted that the Governor supports the project. Mr. Trepal said that when the public is behind a project, it helps with elected officials and encouraged everyone to voice their opinion on the website or to the appropriate State officials.
- The method of integrating rail and bus service at the Flatbush Station was discussed. Mr. Trepal noted that WSA has been meeting with ConnDOT regarding the method by which the services will be coordinated. He gave a description of the preliminary thinking regarding the layout at the Flatbush Avenue Station.
- It was noted that the projection of 3,000 riders per day is really 1,500 rail trips. It was suggested that a way of increasing ridership was to form partnerships with major corporations and other employers such as the State of Connecticut. Mr. Trepal noted that raising the ridership would help to decrease the amount of subsidy required.
- In response to a question regarding the stations being built as public/private partnerships, it was reported that the State will build and own the stations as it makes for easier operational efficiencies.
- The representative from the Greater Hartford Transit District said that they were ready for rail to start now. She noted that 400,000 people per year go through Union Station in Hartford and that Hartford should be a destination, but that poor mass transit into the City would hamper this.



## New Haven-Hartford-Springfield (NHHS) Commuter Rail Environmental Assessment

- It was noted that the Cross Continental Railroad was built in three years largely due to no government involvement, such as the requirement for Environmental Assessments.
- In response to a question regarding purchasing new rail cars, Mr. Davis stated that nowhere in the United States are rail cars being produced and that it takes years from the time the cars are ordered for them to be built and delivered.
- Again, concern was raised over the length of time that it would take for the service to actually start. Considerable discussion regarding the impediments to moving the project forward followed. There was a concern that “short-sighted politicians” would take money away from this project and apply it to another project. A question of trust was also raised since many promises had been made in the past and were not delivered.
- It was questioned whether the TOD activities at the train station were taken into account when estimating ridership projections. Mr. Trepal replied that WSA will come up with some recommendations for development opportunities at sites around the stations. As far as the ridership projections were concerned, the process requires use of the State’s travel demand model, however, we will be looking to try to supplement that model with additional information to qualitatively include some additional potential ridership.
- The State’s travel demand model does not take into account fluctuation in the price of gas.
- A date certain should be given for the completion of the project to build trust. The anticipated date for completion of the Environmental Assessment is February 2010 and it was stated that this date must be adhered to.

Submitted by:

Wilbur Smith Associates

Bruce Hyde

12-11-08

Connecticut Department of Transportation:

Approved by: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: