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Residents, officials voice support for commuter rail expansion

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Groton — Residents and officials on Thursday voiced strong support for expanding commuter rail, as the state Department of Transportation studies the feasibility of expanding Shore Line East into Westerly, R.I. and adding passenger rail between New London and Norwich.

As part of its Eastern Connecticut Corridor Rail and Transit Study, the DOT also is looking at the feasibility of building new train stations in Groton and Stonington Borough.

About 50 people attended an information session Thursday at the Submarine Force Museum. Another meeting was held at Kelly STEAM Magnet School in Norwich Monday evening and virtually on Thursday evening.

According to the DOT's presentation, a feasibility study is "the first step in evaluating the viability of service," and depending on the study's findings, "increasingly detailed studies and designs may follow."

Officials representing Groton, New London, Stonington and Westerly, R.I., were among those who spoke in support of the expanded rail service Thursday.

When looking at the feasibility for passenger rail service between New London and Norwich, Jill Cahoon, rail and transit lead with AECOM, a consultant for the project, said freight tracks currently exist between the two cities and are operated by Genesee and Wyoming, Inc.

But since the freight trains operate at pretty slow speeds, substantial infrastructure and technology improvements would be needed to allow for passenger rail service in the Thames River corridor, and follow-up studies, including bridge inspections, grade crossings, and utilities would be needed, she said.

According to preliminary findings outlined in the presentation, it would be "conceptually feasible" to have one commuter train per hour run in each direction between Westerly, R.I. and New London.

The DOT looked at the 2-mile areas around both the potential rail corridors — the Thames River corridor and the Northeast Corridor from New London to Westerly — and found six of the region's eight largest employers as well as concentrations of office buildings and housing, Cahoon said.

She said future projections show growth in both population and employment, which can bring new opportunities. She transportation officials are looking forward to that growth and what those new opportunities could bring with regard to new transit investment, including travel travel times and direct connections for local employers.

In response to a question about what kind of opposition the DOT is expecting, DOT Project Manager Elise Greenberg said all the feedback the agency received so far has been favorable.

Several legislators spoke in support. State Sen. Heather Somers, R-Groton, said it's very important for the region and called it an "economic driver." She also said it would help with carbon emissions moving forward.

State Rep. Anthony Nolan, D-New London, pointed to the number of people traveling through the region and how many more would travel through if more rail service was available.

Aundré Bumgardner, state representative elect for the 41st House District spoke in support and made comments, including that if Shore Line East is extended, he wants to make sure that at-grade crossings get the best technology to ensure safety.

Residents also expressed enthusiasm. "I'm so excited about this," said Penny Parsekian of Westerly, R.I. "Rail has been in my heart for a long, long time."

She asked if the DOT is looking at the aging population in the area, because people who are getting older want to keep moving around and go to places like the Garde Arts Center in New London, but don't want to drive. She said the demographic group also tends to have more money than a lot of other demographic groups.

The DOT said it is considering all demographics and how that may lead to new demand for service.

Paige Bronk, the Town of Groton's economic and community development manager, said the town is in full support of the feasibility study. Bronk and Susan Cullen, Stonington's director of economic and community development, spoke about the importance of the connection with Rhode Island.

Eugenia Villagra, co-chair of Groton Conservation Advocates, said the proposal to extend Shore Line East from New London to Westerly and Norwich will provide an option to travel in and out of Groton that will lead to less pollution and clearer skies, healthier communities, and the reduction of harmful chemicals.

In a written comment, Zell Steever, chairman of the Groton Resiliency and Sustainability Task Force and member of the CT Commuter Rail Council, said "Expanded train and transit services will not solve all the issues before us, but it may begin to resolve some of the more difficult problems associated with traffic congestion, highway deaths, public safety, climate change, air pollution and sustainable development."

Speakers also said it would be nice to extend commuter rail to Rhode Island's T.F. Green International Airport and to link Electric Boat Quonset Point in Rhode Island with Electric Boat in Connecticut. DOT officials said the Rhode Island DOT set the parameters for this study to only extend to Westerly.

More information is available at https://portal.ct.gov/Eastern-CT-Rail

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