



Connecticut Commuter Rail Council
Minutes: Wednesday, September 21, 2022 – 6:30 PM
Clinton Town Hall & Zoom

The following Councilmembers were in attendance: Jim Gildea, Zell Steever, Marcellus Edwards, Doug Hauslauden, Blaize Levitan, Julia McGrath, Mellissa Kane, and Kate Rosen.

The following also attended: Ben Cornelius, MNRR; Rich Jankovich, CDOT; Eric Bergeron, CDOT; Jim Carlson, CDOT; State Senator Osten; State Senator Somers; State Representative Goupil; State Representative Conley; State Representative Carney; and members of the public.

Council Business:

Meeting called to order at 6:35pm.

Chairman Gildea opened the meeting by stating intention of the meeting in Clinton was to advocate for SLE, see SLE returned to full 100% pre-covid service, and call attention to this vibrant line. The Council also was seeking an update on the expansion study.

The August meeting minutes were approved unanimously.

Public Comments:

Sam Gold, RiverCOG Executive Director and New Haven resident, thanked the council for the meeting on SLE, very happy about the M8s. Through all their planning work, like the regional housing plan, time and time again, it is transportation and housing that is most important. We need good public transit. SLE is backbone for the region and there is so much potential for TOD. The line is not taken care of and we need to link up the transit methods better. Bus needs to be incorporated into the larger picture.

Kate Rattan of the SECOG, echo what Sam said, emphasized that SLE is core to our transportation network. This region has for too long had diminished service compared to other areas of the state. Need to bring the line up to good operating condition and want to see expansion into SE CT and to RI & Boston.

SLE Commuter from Stratford, Riding SLE, look at past pre pandemic, train was jammed packed. Seen lots of delays and cancellations. Looks like lack of coordination and ownership when there is a problem. When a train is delayed more than 15-20 minutes, have buses ready. 2-3hrs to go to Westbrook. It is so unreliable, hopefully some solutions. People from Yale

Jeff Mehan of Madison, riding MNR since the 70s, used to work in Stamford. SLE is just not competitive to ride over car, there are no direct trains through New Haven. We need the express train through New Haven to return. Need better, frequent, and more reliable service to make SLE attractive, otherwise continue to prefer to drive from Madison to MNR side instead of taking SLE.

State Representative Christine Goupil (CT35th), supports the essential work on the SLE expansion in coordination with the COG, SLE is essential for region and for Middletown, so important for business. Need to improve the timetables and connection. Current schedule design is not conducive to connections and increasing ridership to key areas in Connecticut. CDOT should also look at SLE advertising opportunities and consider adding some arts and culture.

Elizabeth Peck of Groton Conservation Commission, committed to protecting environment. It is important to extend SLE to New London and eventually connect lines. CT's largest contributors of greenhouse gases are cars and transportation. We need to double down on commitment on reducing number of single occupancy vehicles on the road. CT needs more trains and fewer cars, but trains need better connectivity. We don't have time for this to take years, some action on improving SLE service needs to happen in timely manner.

Sergio Leone of Mt Vernon NY, a frequent SLE commuter to the region. Experienced two major issues, has been stranded in New London because following train in Old Saybrook. Had to take Uber from New London to New Haven. Substitute buses are poorly communicated, the schedule showed it as making scheduled times. In reality, trip required 3 separate buses, 1 bus stopping at different locations. Guilford then need to transfer, need to go east, but SLE had a 2 hour wait. Also, rush hour frequency is poor. Hour and half gap during most critical time of the day is seriously detrimental to ridership. CDOT needs to address the 3rd rail issue and clearance, as soon as possible. Need connectivity between MNR and SLE, current schedule doesn't do that for riders.

State Representative Christine Conley (CT40th), supports expanded SLE rail service to the east. From someone who lives here, with CT's largest private employer, high rate of asthma in Groton, we need to invest in the region's rail. It is much longer to take train to Stamford instead of driving, especially with poor schedule design and no connectivity. A rider needs to drive to Old Saybrook, and then no thru service so it requires another transfer in New Haven. The experience for commuters is very difficult to navigate.

Jesse Straton of Groton Resiliency Task Force, CT needs to expand rail service east, with some of State's largest employers and top tourist destinations. SLE expansion could help drive economic expansion, environmentally sustainable method of transit.

Jack Thompson of Madison, CDOT needs to improve SLE service, there should be more trains during peak hours. Used to ride Hartford Line upstate, either 735am or next train is 835am. On SLE, if missed connection, need to get a ride back via car or could be waiting hours, even at peak commutes. There is not enough frequency, so if miss connections, huge delay of hours. Also, most stations have platform on each side, Madison only has 1 platform.

Aundré Bumgardner, Groton Town Council, has been highly outspoken supporter for SLE service and the clear need to extend SLE to Connecticut's eastern border and beyond. There is so much potential in the region for SLE and improved public transit. There should be better connectivity between the lines, a seamless commuter experience across services. SE region of CT has largest employers in Connecticut.

Brenden Garrity of RiverCOG, supports expansion of SLE and transit-oriented development around key sites. Poor design where buses can't pull into the train stations, need to have a broader picture of transit experience. Buses should be brought into the process earlier and designing as a transit system, not broken pieces. Buses currently providing service that the trains should be providing.

State Senator Heather Somers (CT18th), clarify that State of CT largest employer in the State. A few questions: 1). How do we handle the problem we have that Amtrak owns the rail line, what do we need to do to make that more financially sustainable? 2). What's the ridership number to make SLE feasible? SLE is a national leader in subsidy, could be because of current system design. What ridership number do we need? Also, she issued a challenge to CDOT: Mystic is #1 tourist destination in Connecticut, if we could add temporary service from June to October, or even service to handle a few high volume weekends, like the art festival that brings 100,000 people to Mystic. Just this month, 40,000 people turned out, there could be a charge for premium for weekend service. CDOT must improve connections and schedule design.

Miriam Grossman, disappointed that mask optional – there should be a mask only car option. Real issue with the cleanliness of MNR bathrooms. Current schedule has no good solution to last mile problem.

Steven of Stonington, since 2011 has been thinking about expanding SLE east. He strongly supports improving service and linking up transit options with bike friendly commute routes. He has a following of over 500 people online, all surrounding discussion of improving and expanding public transit in SE Connecticut.

SLE Commuter: Travel twice per week up to Boston – need more service, whether it be a mix of services. Number of SLE trains is limited to entice ridership. For Amtrak, weekend trains sellout frequently, and along the train route, traffic is terrible. Weekend service sellout to go to both Providence, Boston, and even NY (Amtrak). Also, has seen pedestrians run under closed crossing gate at Old Saybrook, run to catch train. People run under the gate, almost hit by trains. Accident waiting to happen.

Vincent Antonelli, Vice Chair of Groton Economic Develop Commission, supports expansion of SLE to the east. There should also be more trains during the summer to accommodate high tourist season. Could help alleviate parking issues in the area, including huge turnout in Mystic.

CDOT Update on SLE Service & Study

See attached PPT presentation delivered by Eric Bergeron of CDOT, and CDOT's consultants from AECOM.

Old Business/New Business

Jim Gildea will follow up with CDOT about performance data that was promised by the agency months ago.

Second Round Public Comments:

State Senator Cathy Osten (CT18th), thanked the CCRC for bringing attention to SLE and hosting an essential conversation about existing service and expansion. Thanked CDOT and AECOM for good presentation, emphasized that just looking at the subsidy of SLE in isolation is not correct view, we heavily subsidize highways and roads. The goal of the system is not to break even, but to provide important and necessary service to region with State's largest private employers. Fully support SLE, fully support eastward expansion. Clarified that the Legislature fully funded CDOT's funding request for SLE, CDOT's funding request did not include returning to 100% of pre-COVID schedule. If returning to full schedule is only a funding issue, then CDOT should make the request to the CGA.

The October meeting will be virtual.

Meeting was adjourned at 8:30PM

Respectfully submitted,
Blaise Levitan, Secretary

DRAFT