

Bills propose restoring Shore Line East service to pre-pandemic levels

February 27, 2023 8:12 pm • Last Updated: February 27, 2023 8:13 pm

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Hartford — Blaize Levitan, a rail commuter and a member of the Connecticut Commuter Rail Council, testified Monday that it's now extremely challenging to ride Shore Line East and make a connection to another rail line.

"It's the only line in Connecticut that's still operating at significantly reduced service," he said.

Levitan and other supporters of restoring Shore Line East rail service to pre-pandemic levels testified Monday before the Connecticut General Assembly's Transportation Committee, saying that Shore Line East provides a critical service to commuters and reduces harmful effects on the environment.

S.B. 1078, introduced by the Transportation Committee, would require the state Department of Transportation to restore Shore Line East service, as well as expand service and purchase new rail cars for the Waterbury and Danbury branches of the New Haven rail line.

It would also study the feasibility of service between Hartford and Middletown and of operating hybrid trains on the Danbury branch of the New Haven line, among other measures. The bill would direct the DOT to use a competitive process to find an operator for Shore Line East.

Another bill, **SB 1079**, calls for the DOT to implement the Connecticut Commuter Rail Council's recommendations, including the restoration of Shore Line East, new rail cars for the Waterbury and Danbury branches, and a fare equity analysis to evaluate permanently running fare-free buses.

DOT Commissioner Garrett Eucalitto testified that if the bills passed, the DOT would not be able to fully restore Shore Line East service because Governor Ned Lamont's proposed budget does not include the funding.

Kate Rozen, a Connecticut Commuter Rail Council member, said in written testimony that Shore Line East is at 66% of pre-Covid levels, and the governor's proposal would fund service at 44% of pre-pandemic levels.

Zell Steever, chairman of the Groton Resiliency and Sustainability Task Force and a rail council member, said about 40% of the greenhouse gases in Connecticut come from the transportation sector, which is well above other states' averages of about 26%.

"Anything we can do to provide an attractive alternative to get people out of their cars and their trucks to go to where they need to go on a timely and regular basis will be important," Steever said.

The state is currently **studying** the **potential expansion** of Shore Line East to Westerly, Rhode Island, which he said is important because eastern Connecticut is a manufacturing hub, with Pfizer, the increased hiring at Electric Boat, and the crews needed to serve on the submarines.

Madison resident Jack Dobson wrote that Shore Line East schedules often do not line up with other rail schedules, especially the Hartford Line, which hurts the economy. Shoreline residents who commute to Hartford often are deterred from taking the train, "increasing our CO₂ output and making our state less accessible to those who either do not want to own a car, or who cannot afford one."

Jim Gildea, chairman of the rail council, wrote that the subsidies paid for Shore Line East are cited as a reason why the line should not be fully restored.

But he countered that no other rail lines had to meet ridership requirements, as Shoreline East must do, in order to be restored to full service. He added that one of the best ways to lower the subsidy is to attract more riders.

"We have an obligation to provide quality transportation," Gildea said.

He said "we understand that in some fashion, this is about getting the communities along the Shore Line East, to change their zoning laws to add more housing closer to the rail stations," but the two issues should be separate.

Support for restoring Shore Line East comes from both sides of the aisle, including Sen. Heather Somers, R-Groton and Sen. Cathy Osten, D-Sprague, a Transportation Committee member and Chair of the Appropriations Committee, who is working to include funding for the service in the budget.

Daryl Johnson, legislative director for Local 1 of the Association of Commuter Rail Employees, said many people take Shore Line East to New Haven and transfer to the New Haven line to go to Fairfield County or New York City.

"Less service on Shore Line East simply made them drive to New Haven and then board the New Haven line train in New Haven, meaning more traffic on I-95, a more harsh commute, and a higher carbon footprint," he said. "We hear about this every day from our riders on our trains."

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