



Train study rides slow track

Extending Danbury branch line into New Milford among options under consideration

By Dirk Perrefort
Staff Writer

Article Last Updated: 06/18/2008 10:56:40 AM EDT

DANBURY -- Options to expand service on Metro-North Railroad's Danbury branch line are the focus of a just-launched study that state and federal officials discussed Tuesday in City Hall.

They include extending the line to New Milford and even electrifying it.

Other options in state Department of Transportation's Phase 2 study include partial electrification, improving the line without changing the infrastructure, and adding stations in Brookfield and New Milford.

DOT officials said the study will take about three years to complete. The final report will outline which option, or combination of options, will be pursued.

Then the improvements can be designed and money found to pay for them, which could take several more years.

"It's frustrating that we're spending millions of dollars on a study to tell us that we have to spend millions of dollars on upgrades to the rail line," Mayor Mark Boughton said.

"It doesn't mean that we shouldn't do the study, but we should move as expeditiously as possible to expand mass transit, especially in light of the gas crisis."

John Hartwell, the Democratic candidate for state Senate in the 26th District, which includes Bethel, Redding and Ridgefield, said he was also dismayed at the time frame for the study.

"We all know we need to do something, but what amazes me is that the study alone will take three years to complete," Hartwell said after Tuesday's meeting. "That means it will be a long time before we see improvements."

He said the most positive news to come out of the meeting was that a new signaling system might be in place within the next three years.

Carmine Trotta, assistant planning director with DOT, said the new system will allow more frequent service on the line and could allow trains to move from the north and south at the same time.

He added that the study will look at the environmental impact of the various options -- a requirement of state and federal law. Information obtained through the study can also be used as part of the final permitting process for the projects selected.

Hartwell, who spoke with commuters at stations throughout the area this week, said he met many people who drive from New Milford and Brookfield to other towns to use the line.

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.

PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics.



FormatDynamics®

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



One commuter, he said, drives along Route 7 every day from New Milford to Ridgefield to the Branchville station. Others, he said, use the Bethel station.

"Everyone I spoke with said we need more trains and more parking," he said. "I also support expanding the line to New Milford, while I don't support electrification."

Hartwell said electrification could cost as much as \$165 million and would only save commuters about 12 minutes. Expanding the service to New Milford, however, could add hundreds of new riders and would cost about \$100 million.

Colin Pease, vice president of special projects for Housatonic Railroad, said studies suggest a New Milford extension could add from 800 to 1,600 new riders.

Housatonic owns the track that runs from Danbury to New Milford. It was built in the 19th century for passenger service, Pease said, but is now used only for freight.

He added that passenger service could be extended even farther than New Milford -- into Litchfield County and eventually into western Massachusetts.

"There is no reason why freight and passenger services can't work together on the same line, as long as it's incorporated in the planning stages," Pease said.

"It's something railroads do every day. Not only

would it get more cars off the road, but it would also get more trucks off the highways."

DOT officials will inform residents about the study at meetings throughout the area this week.

Contact Dirk Perrefort at dperrefort@newstimes.com or at (203) 731-3358.

Five alternatives being examined in phase II study
 No build -- maintaining current system
 Current system management --improving the system without infrastructure improvements
 South Norwalk to Danbury improvements -- minor alignment changes and electrification of
 Norwalk to Danbury
 Danbury to New Milford extension -- extending line into New Milford and adding new train stations.
 Partial electrification -- Electrification from South Norwalk to vicinity of Merritt Parkway in Norwalk with feeder bus/rail service to Danbury.
 Danbury branch line phase II study time line
 Initial public meetings -- summer 2008
 Pre-draft public informational hearings -- summer 2009
 Draft plan and informational meetings -- summer 2010
 Publish final report -- spring 2011
 If you go Initial public meetings on Danbury line phase II study
 Wednesday from 6 to 8 p.m. Wilton Town Hall Annex, 238 Danbury Road, Wilton.
 Thursday from 6 to 8 p.m. Ridgefield Town Hall, 400 Main St., Ridgefield.

Advertisement

A bright idea in online advertising.
 PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics.

FormatDynamics®

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™