

Danbury rail line doesn't work for reverse commuters

By Mark Ginocchio, ADVOCATE Staff Writer

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Bruce Murray said he is willing to take a car off lower Fairfield County's overcrowded roads by riding the train to work.

But no train is available that could get him to work on time.

"I would rather take the train every day then take an hour minimum to drive 20 miles," said Murray, a Stratford resident who works for a nonprofit firm in Wilton that's blocks from the town's stop on Metro-North Railroad's Danbury branch.

"But the earliest I could get to work is 9:30 a.m.," he said. "And I need to be there at least an hour earlier." The Danbury branch is a single-track line that can operate trains in only one direction at a time. Metro-North officials said they must first meet the demands of customers headed toward lower Fairfield County and New York City in the mornings.

So until the state comes up with the funding to improve the line, potential "reverse commuters," those headed toward Danbury, such as Murray, have to wait until the first train heading north leaves South Norwalk at 9:16 a.m., meaning they won't get to work until after the standard 9-to-5 day begins, railroad spokeswoman Marjorie Anders said.

"We would run more northbound service if we had the capacity to do it," Anders said. "But at that time in the morning, most of our trains are only going south."

The Danbury branch carries only 44 reverse commuters each weekday, Anders said. Overall, the branch has about 1,000 riders on a weekday.

The scheduling issue epitomizes the limitations of the Danbury branch and major multimillion-dollar improvements are necessary, said state Rep. Antoinetta "Toni" Boucher, R-Wilton. "I want people to start thinking more progressively about mass transit," Boucher said. "Improving the line provides flexibility for the whole region and for cities like Norwalk and Stamford." State Department of Transportation officials estimated it could take "hundreds of millions" of dollars to increase capacity on the Danbury branch, but Boucher said it's worth it.

"We were willing to spend billions of dollars on UConn, and I think this would have a bigger impact for the region and the economy," she said. "It gives people a better access to jobs and with what it can do in the long-term, it's not as expensive as people think."

The DOT is evaluating the final pieces of the first phase of a Danbury branch study, said Carmine Trotta, assistant director of intermodal planning for the agency. Possibilities include electrifying the tracks, double tracking or extending the line to New Milford. At a fraction of the cost, the DOT could add "passing lanes" at certain areas that could add some capacity in both directions, Trotta added.

"There's all kinds of things that we can do that we still need to whittle down," he said. "There are more than 100 options."

Challenges the DOT faces, besides financial, have to do with property acquisitions, Trotta said. Widening of the old Route 7 between Norwalk and New Milford is taking away land that could be used for adding more tracks, he added.

Rail advocates hope a decision is made soon on which direction the state favors.

"If they had budgeted this five years ago instead of spending money on studies, they could have done the job by now," said Rodney Chabot, chairman of the Connecticut Rail Commuter Council. "Service on the Danbury branch is pathetic, but if they increased service on the line, there would be potential for more riders and reverse commuters, too. (The state) needs to get on with it."

Officials look into rail upgrades for Danbury line

By Matthew Strozier, ADVOCATE Staff Writer

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NORWALK -- Elected officials and residents said last night that upgrades to Metro-North Railroad's Danbury branch are vital to combat traffic congestion. "I've been wanting this for years," said Republican state Rep. Antonietta "Toni" Boucher, who represents parts of Wilton and Norwalk and attended a forum about the Danbury branch at Norwalk City Hall last night.

Boucher said the state turned its back on the Danbury branch and, as a result, "it's a constant struggle" for branch riders to get needed trains. A state consultant, Washington Group International, is studying projects to enhance Danbury branch service. Possibilities include track changes, longer passing lanes and replacing diesel engines with electric-powered trains. The study started recently and the forum was to get public comment. The first phase is expected to be finished in the spring.

Those who attended last night said the state is right to consider infrastructure upgrades, but riders' needs and demographic changes demand a closer look. "I don't believe that simply improving the travel times with existing service is going to increase ridership," said Martin Overton, Norwalk's assistant director of public works. "What will increase ridership is meeting the needs of those who are not currently on the train."

Norwalk Mayor Alex Knopp said the Danbury branch is particularly important, given population and job growth projections. The Stamford-Norwalk area expects to have job growth while the Danbury area should get population growth, he said, which will increase demand on the Danbury branch. Washington Group's study will examine the cost of the upgrades. Engineers last night said "electrification" projects for other train lines have cost \$1 million a mile or more. After the cost is clear, the state will have to decide whether increased ridership is worth the money.

"For the people we are going to get, are we willing to make the investment?" asked Len Lapsis, a supervising planner for the state Department of Transportation. The Danbury branch stretches from Norwalk into Wilton, Ridgefield, Redding, Bethel and Danbury on a curvy route that keeps trains at a top speed of 50 mph. Usual travel time is 47 minutes from Norwalk to Danbury.

Projects are being considered by the Washington Group that could cut the time by five to 15 minutes. By improving time or frequency, state officials want to attract riders who now take Metro-North's Harlem Line trains. In a 1992 study, for example, more than 15 percent of the cars parked at the surveyed Harlem Line stations had Connecticut license plates. The largest percentage of Connecticut license plates were found at stations in Dover Plains, Harlem Valley-Wingdale, Brewster, Purdy's and Brewster North. Electric-power train service ended on the Danbury branch in 1961 during a time of decline for passenger rail service in the state and nationally. When it was electrified in 1925, travel time from Danbury to South Norwalk fell from 55 minutes to 42 minutes.