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DOT Sets Meeting In New Milford On A Rail Study

By: Nancy Barnes

11/23/2005

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NEW MILFORD-The state Department of Transportation (DOT) is holding a public information meeting Dec. 1 at the New Milford Railroad Station to present the results of a draft study that considers the extension of passenger service from Danbury to New Milford.

New Milford has not had formal passenger service since 1971, when it was discontinued. "We're looking at a range of options from the no-build option, which is essentially just to continue with the way the Danbury branch is being operated, to a maximum build, which is electrification of the branch," said DOT Transportation Planner Leonard Lapsis, who supervised the Danbury Branch Electrification Feasibility Study.

An upgrading of the line from Danbury to New Milford is one of five options the study is considering, with Mr. Lapsis observing that those five options had been whittled down from more than 20 alternatives the DOT had examined.

In recent years, the New Milford Rail Service Restoration Society, which is co-chaired by New Milford residents Bill Johnson and Robert Rush, has pushed for the extension of passenger services from Danbury to New Milford.

On Monday, Mr. Johnson said he had used Metro-North's Harlem Line when he lived in Hawthorne, N.Y., to commute to work in New York. He said Mr. Rush had used the Metro-North commuter service as well.

"I think it indicates a good ridership at a modest cost. It's a step along the way," said Mr. Johnson, referring to the report on the draft study. "It's pretty important that we have a good representation," he said.

Mr. Lapsis said a review of the five options the DOT is considering will take another year, although he painted a limited picture of how funds for any work associated with

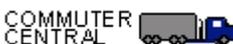
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the Danbury branch could be achieved.

"Every dollar the DOT expects to receive in the next 20 years has been allocated," he said, noting that there are no funds in the 20-year-budget for discretionary projects, such as planned passenger rail service to New Milford.

"If a new project comes up and is determined to have more value than another on the list, another source of funding might be sought," he said, adding that if the project were deemed sufficiently important it would have to replace another project or projects on the list.

"It's a study that presents the facts to the real decision-makers, not me," Mr. Lapsis said of the draft study audiences will hear.

He did say that every federal transportation bill has earmarks, which are secured through the state's congressional representation, and that the re-allocation of monies for one of those projects would be one way to pay for the costs of projects the study might recommend.

The study, which was paid for by federal funds, was begun by the DOT in March 2003 to assess the feasibility of electrification of the Danbury branch as well as other work associated with it.

It follows an action study completed for the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials in 1996. That study concluded that rail service would ease congestion along Route 7, although an exact ridership projection was never made.

The current study also addresses congestion along Route 7, in addition to the use by Connecticut rail commuters of the Metro-North Harlem Line across the state line in New York.

According to www.danburybranchstudy.com, which contains the report, the estimated capital cost of extending passenger service from Danbury to New Milford would be \$30 to \$36 million, with \$11 million allocated for equipment.

The rail line from Bridgeport to New Milford was completed by the Housatonic Railroad in 1840, with the remainder of the line, which passed through Canaan to end in Pittsfield, Mass., completed in 1843.

Then, backers of the Housatonic Railroad viewed the line as necessary to serve the iron, granite, marble and lime industries located in Litchfield County, and as a means to create a water-rail route between New York City and Albany, N.Y.

On the draft study, the DOT held a public information meeting in Ridgefield on Nov. 17, and it is scheduled to hold a public meeting in Wilton Nov. 29.

The snow date for the Dec. 1 meeting in New Milford, which is scheduled to begin at 7 p.m. is Dec. 7.

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