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Hearings to focus on possible Danbury rail upgrades

By Mark Ginocchio
Staff Writer

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Commuters concerned about rail service on Metro-North Railroad's Danbury branch, which runs along Route 7 between Norwalk and Danbury, may learn about possible improvements at two public hearings this week.

The state Department of Transportation has scheduled two hearings to discuss the findings of its study of the Danbury branch. The first hearing will be 7 to 9 p.m. tomorrow at the Wilton Town Hall annex. The second is 7 to 9 p.m. Thursday at the New Milford Railroad Station.

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Legislators and rail advocates pushing for service improvements along heavily traveled Route 7 hope for a high turnout.

"This is something that has been the rug for too long," said state Sen. D-Norwalk. "The Danbury branch has been the stepchild to the New Haven line. It has been neglected for so long."

The Danbury branch, which serves 1,000 people a day, is a single-track line that can run trains in only one direction. It operates without electricity and affects speed.

The state's study looked at electrification and double-tracking and examined alternatives. Funding limits may not allow a complete overhaul of the branch.

One alternative would be to add passing lanes at certain sections, enabling the state to run trains simultaneously in each direction. That would increase the frequency of service but could create more stoppages because of safety requirements, the study found.

Many of the improvements would require the state to acquire rights-of-way, which could cost more than \$200 million. But the increased service could bring in hundreds of commuters, according to the study.

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study.

Another alternative would be to extend service past Danbury to New Milford. That could add riders and cost at least \$30 million, the study showed.

Improving the Danbury branch could play a key role in improving traffic on Route 7, rail advocates said. Plans for Super 7, the controversial highway extending from Norwalk to Danbury, has stalled for decades because some residents oppose it.

"Considering the governor has said the Super 7 is all but a dead issue, the least we can do is keep the railroad," said Rodney Chabot, chairman of the Connecticut Commuter Rail Council.

State Rep. Antoinetta "Toni" Boucher, R-Wilton, who opposes the Super 7, said improving the Danbury branch is a necessity.

"The Norwalk to Danbury train line remains one of our biggest unused resources," Boucher said.

-- Anyone unable to attend the hearing can provide comments to DOT by mail at 30 Chris Newington, CT 06111, by fax at (860) 667-7002; or by e-mail at steve.gazillo@wgint.com Dec. 22.

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