

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) is conducting an Alternatives Analysis/Federal Environmental Impact Statement/Connecticut Environmental Impact Evaluation (AA/EIS/EIE) study to explore the potential social, environmental and economic impacts associated with five alternatives for improving its Danbury Branch commuter rail service between South Norwalk and Danbury, Connecticut (a total of 23.6 miles). The study also examines extending commuter rail service 16 miles from Danbury to New Milford along the existing Housatonic Railroad's freight lines. These proposed improvements would enhance existing commuter rail service in the corridor and expand mobility for the region's growing workforce, as well as potentially reduce congestion in the Route 7 corridor and provide economic benefits to communities along the Branch line.

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) and Connecticut Environmental Policy Act (CEPA) require that a formal scoping process be conducted as the initial step in preparing an AA/EIS/EIE. The purpose of the scoping phase is to inform the public and governmental review agencies that an AA/EIS is being prepared in the corridor, and to solicit input from these groups on the alternatives being considered, the impacts to be evaluated and the proposed public involvement process. **This report documents the scoping phase of the NEPA/CEPA process for this study.**

The AA/EIS/EIE work is being conducted under the direction of the U.S. Federal Transit Administration (FTA) as the sponsoring Federal agency, and ConnDOT. The South West Regional Planning Agency (SWRPA) has been identified as a cooperating agency in this study under the guidelines of the NEPA process and the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). In addition, the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials (HVCEO) is also being consulted as part of this process.

Danbury Branch Study Corridor

The study corridor extends approximately 40 miles north-south from the City of Norwalk at a point just north of the Long Island Sound in the south to the City of New Milford in the Housatonic River Valley in the northwest part of Connecticut. Rail right of way and tracks are owned by ConnDOT from South Norwalk station approximately 23 miles through the cities and towns of Norwalk, Wilton, Redding, Ridgefield, Bethel, and Danbury. From Danbury north, tracks are owned by the Housatonic freight railroad through the town of Brookfield and city of New Milford. (See Study Corridor Map). As a result of the public scoping meeting process, the potential extension of service between New Milford and Pittsfield, MA, a distance of 72 track miles, will also be considered.

Danbury Branch Study History

The initial study of improvements to commuter rail service on the Danbury Branch resulted from a number of corridor transportation studies conducted by ConnDOT and the regional planning agencies dating back to the 1980s. All previous studies recommended improvements to the Branch's rail service. ConnDOT was awarded a federal grant to evaluate potential electrification and other rail improvements and in 2003 began a Feasibility Study to explore track, system and service improvements to the Branch as well as consider possible extension of service to New Milford. That study, known as Phase I, examined more than 25 options to improve service and included considerable public, agency and municipal participation. A study advisory committee was formed to participate throughout the planning process.

The primary tasks of Phase I consisted of:

- Data Collection and Review
- Preparation of a Purpose and Need/Existing Conditions report
- Evaluation of Engineering Alternatives
- An initial environmental review
- Initial Ridership projections
- Evaluation of the impact of electrification
- Alternatives Summary Evaluation Report
- Public Involvement
- Presentation of findings to the Connecticut Transportation Strategy Board (TSB)
- Public and Agency Scoping Process for Phase II

Phase I Public Involvement effort

Phase I included an extensive Public Involvement program. A total of six public meetings, five Study Advisory Committee meetings, and 17 meetings with local officials, the regional planning agencies, state regulatory agencies and local transit operators as well as the state Transportation Strategy Board were held during Phase I. A project website at www.DanburyBranchStudy.com was started in April 2003 and has been in continuous operation since. The web site provides information regarding study progress and published documents, meeting notices and reports, and an opportunity for the public to submit comments and suggestions. The Phase I public involvement documents can be found in the tabbed section, Phase I Public Involvement Documents within this report.

Phase I Results

An extensive list of potential improvement options in Phase I were screened and evaluated with input from public, state and local officials and the study's Advisory Committee. A total of five improvement alternatives were identified for further evaluation in Phase II. A copy of the Alternatives Summary Evaluation (executive summary) report is included in the tabbed section, Alternatives Summary Evaluation Report of this document. These alternatives included the following:

A. No Build: the current transportation infrastructure of single track rail, stations, and parking facilities is the basis of the No Build alternative. This alternative includes ongoing, committed and funded roadway and transit projects outlined in the state's Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). The major programmed rail improvement project is the Centralized Traffic Control System (CTC) project, which includes installation of a new rail signal system on the Branch.

B. Transportation System Management (TSM): the TSM alternative represents everything that can be done without significant capital investment. This alternative provides the baseline against which the cost competitiveness of major capital investments can be evaluated. This includes potential skip stop and express service on the Branch as well as additionally scheduled trains.

C. Improvements - South Norwalk to Danbury: this alternative would involve a series of capital improvements to the branch, including track geometry improvements to improve train speeds along sections of the Branch, addition of passing sidings to allow more frequent service, and electrification of the Branch from South Norwalk to Danbury.

D. Extension of Commuter Rail Service – Danbury to New Milford: this alternative would involve extension of commuter rail service from Danbury to New Milford, with the addition of three new rail stations and parking facilities (sites under consideration include Danbury North, Brookfield and New Milford). Construction of a train storage yard and equipment maintenance yard and facility will also be examined.

E. Transportation Strategy Board (TSB) Alternative – Partial Electrification from South Norwalk to Vicinity of the Merritt Parkway: at the direction of the TSB, consideration will be given to electrifying part of the Branch from South Norwalk to the vicinity of the Merritt Parkway, with the goal to capture traffic at the interchange of Route 7 and Merritt Parkway.

Phase II Scope of Work

At the end of Phase I, ConnDOT and its consultant, URS Corporation, prepared a detailed scope of work (SOW) for evaluating the five alternatives that were identified for further review and study. This SOW was prepared with the review and input of the Study Advisory Committee, state, local and federal regulatory agencies, and with input from the general public. It has formed the basis of the Phase II AA/EIS/EIE. The Phase II Scope of Work as well as the Extra Work resulting from the public and agency scoping meetings can be found in the tabbed section, Scope of Services, AA/DEIS/FEIS.

AA/EIS/EIE Scoping Process

The purpose of the scoping phase of this project is to provide a formal mechanism to inform the public as well as the regulatory and governmental agencies that an AA/EIS/EIE is in preparation and to solicit input on the project's scope of work from these groups. The key elements for review during the scoping process have been:

- Scope of Work

- Public Involvement process
- Purpose and Need Statement

Initial Agency Scoping Meeting

A scoping coordination meeting was held on July 11, 2006 at the New Haven Railroad Station to discuss the scope of work with the Federal and State resource agencies, including the environmental resources to be investigated, the level of detail required for each resource, and further refinement of alternatives. Documentation of these meetings and their results are found in the tabbed section, Initial Agency Scoping Review.

EIS Coordination Plan

Section 6002 of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act-A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) requires that the lead agencies establish a plan for coordinating public and agency participation and comment during the environmental review process. The Coordination Plan is intended to document the process by which ConnDOT will communicate with the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) as the lead federal agency, additional cooperating and participating agencies, regional and local interested parties and the general public regarding the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for State Project No. 301-008. (The EIS Coordination Plan is attached in the tabbed section SAFETEA-LU Section 6002).

FTA Notice of Intent

The FTA published a Notice of Intent (NOI) in the Federal Register on May 30, 2008. The purpose of the NOI was to notify the public that an EIS is being prepared by ConnDOT, in coordination with the Southwest Regional Planning Agency and Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials, with respect to potential improvements to the Danbury Branch commuter rail line. Information describing the proposed action, the possible improvement alternatives, and details on the scoping process as well as contact information was included in the Notice. The complete text of the NOI is attached in the tabbed section, Federal Agency and Connecticut CEQ Notice of Intent.

State of Connecticut Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Scoping Notice

The CEQ published a Scoping Notice on their web site on May 6, 2008. The purpose of the Scoping Notice was to notify the public that an EIE is being prepared by ConnDOT. A brief project description along with contact information was included in the notice. The complete text of the scoping notice is attached in the tabbed section, Federal Agency and Connecticut CEQ Notice of Intent.

Agency Scoping Meeting

A scoping coordination meeting was held on June 17, 2008, at the Danbury City Hall, to discuss the scope of work with Federal, State, local and tribal governmental agencies that may have an

interest in the proposed project. No significant changes to the scope were proposed as a result of this meeting. Documentation on this process is found in the tabbed section, Agency Scoping Documents.

Public Scoping Meetings

A series of Public Scoping Meetings regarding the Danbury Branch commuter rail line study and AA/EIS/EIE were held on Tuesday, June 17, 2008, at the New Milford Town Hall; Wednesday, June 18, 2008, at the Wilton Town Hall Annex Building and Thursday, June 19, 2008 at the Ridgefield Town Hall. The meetings were attended by the chief elected official from each Town and members of various Town Boards and Commissions. Also present at the meeting were state representatives from the districts. Members of the general public, including residents of various towns in the corridor, as well as current commuters on the Branch line, also attended. Total attendance at the three sessions was approximately 140 persons (New Milford: 75, Wilton: 25, and Ridgefield: 40).

Each of the sessions ran from 6:00 to 8:30 pm. The presentation to discuss the project's purpose and need, and the alternatives being evaluated to improve rail service on the Danbury Branch was given twice at each session. Representatives from the Connecticut Department of Transportation and the Consultant Study team were present to discuss the study and address questions from the public.

Questions and comments that were common to each session were:

- Expedite the study process to implement improvements sooner
- The poor quality of the existing service demonstrates the need for improvements to the Branch as soon as possible
- Implement the proposed Centralized Traffic Control (CTC) signal system project as soon as possible

Other comments pertained to the following:

New Milford – support for the future expansion of rail service to New Milford, the positive economic impact of the future service and the potential issues associated with the impact of having a terminus in New Milford.

Wilton - the use of electric vs. diesel trains, the need for and potential physical impact of more stations and more parking, and the positive economic impact of more service.

Ridgefield - the use of electric vs. diesel trains, the need for and potential physical impact of more stations and more parking, and the economic impact of both. The public also noted that Alternatives B and C would be the most beneficial to Ridgefield, while E would be the least beneficial to Ridgefield.

Comments were also received via email and through forms that were distributed at the public meetings and mailed in. A complete summary of all comments received during the public

comment period, as well as inclusion of relevant public scoping meeting documents, are presented in the tabbed section, Public Scoping Meeting Documents.

Resulting Actions

The primary purpose of the Scoping Meetings and overall process was to allow the participating agencies and the public the opportunity to provide review and comment on the project's scope of work and public involvement process. In addition, the study sought confirmation of the project's initial Purpose and Need statement.

Regarding the scope of work review, details of comments received are presented in the tabbed section, Agency Scoping Meeting Documents. Highlights of the agency comments include:

- Addition of Amtrak to the list of agencies reviewing study documents
- Request by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for a joint field review of the project
- Coordinate future project activities with the Narragansett Tribe
- Coordinate project with Connecticut Light and Power's 345kV project

In addition to these comments, the public comments included requests that the study address the following:

Electrification of the line from Danbury to New Milford.

The current impact evaluation for electrification in the study covers from South Norwalk to Danbury. Following public scoping meetings and the results of comments received from the public during the scoping process, it has been recommended that electrification also be considered for the section from Danbury to New Milford, particularly since an extension to New Milford is already under consideration and electrification would make the extension more compatible with the rest of the Branch.

Work to be considered includes conceptual engineering to determine placement of catenary poles and substations, traction power simulation to New Milford (current power simulation only goes to Danbury), development of capital cost estimates for electrification, and evaluation of impacts related to electrification in the EIS process.

Consider future expansion of rail service beyond New Milford to Massachusetts and the Berkshire region.

Comments on the extension of service from Danbury to New Milford included requests to consider extending the passenger rail service well beyond New Milford to include the entire Housatonic corridor up to Pittsfield, MA. As a result of this, the evaluation of further extending the line will include a preliminary review of existing conditions in the corridor (general overview), discussions with the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission and Massachusetts Executive Office of Transportation (EOT) regarding rail plans in the Massachusetts portion of the rail corridor to Pittsfield, MA, and a conceptual cost estimate.

Locate and identify sites for future parking facilities.

The existing scope of work includes analysis of the impacts of ridership growth at each of the stations on the Branch, as well as the potential new stations in Danbury, Brookfield and New Milford. The sites for future parking facilities that will be examined will be at or adjacent to existing stations where a need for additional parking has been identified.

As a result of these comments and requests, the draft Scope of Work is modified to include:

The response to the public meetings and process overall was very positive. However, several email comments addressed the difficulty of persons who are daily commuters to New York City to attend public scoping meetings held in the corridor, regardless of timing. Based on this comment, the Study Team will consider alternative means of participation by commuters unable to attend public meetings, including the possibility of a webinar in the future.

The Project's Purpose and Need statement was well received. Current Purpose and Need Statement is as follows:

Purpose and Need

A preliminary statement of the purpose of, and need for, the proposed project was developed and reviewed in Phase I of the study and refined for the AA/EIS Phase II project as follows:

The purpose of the Danbury Branch Improvement Program and Electrification is to improve mobility options for the traveling public in the South Western and Housatonic Valley regions of Connecticut; to maintain and improve existing commuter rail service on the Branch, as well as to improve its feeder system and intermodal connections on the Branch; and to help reduce congestion in the Route 7 corridor between South Norwalk, CT and New Milford, CT.

To accomplish these purposes, the following specific objectives are defined:

- Improve interstate and intrastate transit mobility, along the north-south South Norwalk – New Milford Corridor.
- Examine enhancements to existing transit services in the corridor by electrifying the branch or portions of it.
- Enhance economic development and Transit Oriented Development (TOD) opportunities in conjunction with participating cities and towns land use plans.
- Improve mobility in the South Norwalk – New Milford Corridor by attracting trips to transit service.