

The New York Times

January 8, 2006, Sunday

COMMUTER'S JOURNAL

Jack Kadden

A Connection to Quaint Could Be on the Way

LESS than a mile separates Route 7 from the town green in New Milford, but on a recent Thursday night, they seemed to be in different worlds.

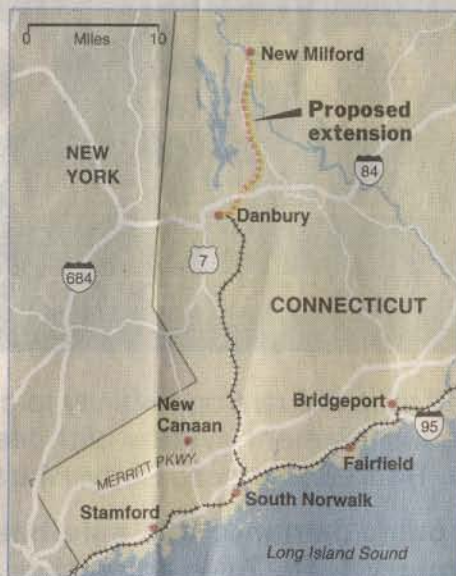
Route 7, the main north-south artery into town, was clogged with weary commuters. Lined with big-box stores, gas stations and fast food restaurants, it is a little bit of New Jersey dropped amid the hills of northwestern Connecticut.

The town green, in contrast, was an oasis of tranquillity, at least at 6:30 p.m., when I strolled its borders, passing churches dating from 1716 and 1742. The trees were decorated with Christmas lights, and it seemed to be the picture of a Connecticut village out of Currier & Ives.

While the green was much as I remembered it, New Milford has changed dramatically since I covered stories there in the 1970's as a reporter for The Waterbury Republican. Going there was fun because it involved driving the back roads of one of the prettiest parts of the state.

Back then, New Milford's population was about 14,000. Today it is well over 28,000, with newcomers drawn by the town's rural beauty and the lower real estate prices that come with a longer commute. Many of the newcomers travel down Route 7 to Danbury — where they can catch a train — and into Fairfield County. Those who go to New York City often cross the state line to Metro-North's Harlem line.

But all that could change. A state-spon-



The New York Times

The Metro-North train line from the shore to Danbury, and the proposed extension to New Milford.

sored study is exploring improvements to the Danbury branch, including electrification to speed up the trains and extending service the 14.3 miles from Danbury to New Milford on tracks now used only for freight trains.

If that were to happen, it would mean the first regular passenger train service to the

town since 1971.

The study estimates that improving the tracks and buying additional equipment would cost about \$47 million and would attract 400 riders in the short run and 800 by 2020.

But Rodney Chabot, the president of the Connecticut Rail Commuter Council, said he believed the number of riders would be higher.

"I think they're lowballing the numbers," he said. "I think they're ridiculously low. When they electrified service from White Plains to Brewster, they expected double the ridership, but they quadrupled the number of riders."

Many officials in the region have endorsed the plan, although New Milford's mayor, Pat Murphy, has reservations. At a hearing on the proposal last month, she wanted to know who would pay for the project — the state or the federal government. She wondered whether it would mean raising the gasoline tax for everyone in the state. She also wanted to know more about the impact of being at the end of a train line. "How would that affect the community," she asked.

Kenneth T. Jackson, a Columbia professor who has studied the growth of suburbs, said such proposals often raise fears that the community will lose its character.

"People see a way of life changing," he said. "I think that if you want things to stay the same, a good way to do it — the best way to do it — is to encourage people to use public transit."

Bill Johnson has been making that argu-

ment since 1992, when he and another New Milford resident, Bob Rush, started the Rail Service Restoration Society. Mr. Johnson, who is 78, said, "My joke is that I hope I live long enough to see this happen."

Mr. Johnson was a rail commuter when he lived in Hawthorne, N.Y.

"I found the hour each way that I had to commute was therapeutic," he said. "It's always been our belief that people who have to drive through that congestion on Route 7 would be amenable to riding the train. We feel eliminating traffic would be beneficial."

Mr. Rush, 62, said he rode the very last train to New Milford in 1971. Since then, he said, "The town has gotten a lot bigger. All the cow fields and cornfields are showing up with houses."

In a state that still relies on 33-year-old rail cars, it's hard to imagine a quick decision on extending the Danbury line. But even if state officials say yes, it will be years before the trains start rolling.

If that should happen, though, Bill Devlin will be eager to buy a monthly ticket.

Mr. Devlin, a history teacher at Darien High School, drives the back roads to Bethel from his home in New Milford, then takes the train to Darien, where he keeps an old bike to ride to work.

He grew up in Brookfield, and his wife is from New Milford, but like many newcomers, he was drawn by the real estate prices. In Darien, he said, housing costs "are pretty astronomical."

"I've been doing this for 16 years," he said. "The train is the thing that has allowed me to keep the job."