

Addressing Stamford's Transportation Challenges: A Smart Growth Approach

As the economic engine of Southwestern Connecticut and the state's only major city with significant population growth over the last 15 years, the City of Stamford seeks to pursue a Smart Growth strategy that focuses development on areas that are easily accessible to transit and encourages a broader mix of land uses for downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods. Despite the recent economic downturn, several major new residential and commercial development projects have continued to progress over the last six months. These include the redevelopment in the City's South End neighborhood, as well as the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) complex. We also anticipate at least 1,500 to 2,000 units of new residential development to be built during the next ten years in the downtown as the national economy returns to a more normal level of activity. We continue to believe there will be significant residential and commercial redevelopment activity in the Waterside, West Side and East Main Street neighborhoods, as well as more limited conversion of existing office and industrial properties to residential and mixed use. In total, these new developments are projected to add between 10,000 and 15,000 more residents and approximately 15,000 new jobs over the next ten years.

Clearly maintaining mobility is a critical issue to Stamford and to the whole State's future economic health. We have all come to recognize that no single mode or project offers a full solution to the broad range of issues that we face – there is no “magic bullet”; nor is there a way to build our way out of the transportation crunch that exists throughout the region. The City has responded with a number of wide-ranging and interconnected transportation initiatives, which I will review for just a moment as they relate to HB 6465.

With the opening of the RBS facility within the next six months, both the volume and proportion of Stamford work-destination rail travel will increase significantly. While our Transportation Center is (by a factor of two) the busiest railroad station in the State and one of the busiest in the entire New York metro area, access to the station and to the South End are currently hampered by narrow roadway widths and low vertical clearances at the railroad underpasses which must be addressed immediately in order for our most promising development initiatives not to stall out.

After many years of preliminary work, the City of Stamford and Connecticut DOT are working on an engineering study of the most critical overpass at Atlantic Street, with concept planning for an additional four overpasses programmed as well. We believe HB 6465 offers a greater assurance that our funding priorities for the overpass projects over the coming years will receive the Department's full attention. In the longer term we see an opportunity to use the Atlantic Street overpass as a corridor for a new light rail system tying together the South End, Downtown and the Bull's Head retail area – and promoting an even wider sphere for Smart Growth development along Bedford and Summer streets, as well as at the terminal points.

In addition, Stamford Urban Transitway facility will provide a direct link between East Main Street and the Transportation Center. Phase I of the project was funded jointly by the City and federal funding with no State participation. This phase is scheduled for completion by the end of 2009. The second phase of the transitway has not yet been fully funded, although the federal stimulus package appears to offer a promising avenue for full-funding in a more immediate timeframe. The estimated total cost of this project is \$90 million for both phases.

The East Main Street corridor lies at the eastern terminus for the Stamford Urban Transitway. Here, the City is also exploring an urban village concept of land use and transportation enhancements for this area. The feasibility for a new train station or bus-oriented intermodal facility for this area is currently being studied by ConnDOT as a component of their New Canaan Branch planning study. Again, we believe HB 6465 offers a more effective route to capital funding for any project identified by the planning study. Stamford's 2002 Master Plan also reinforced the City's overall goal to promote transit-friendly development in the vicinity of the Glenbrook and Springdale train stations on Metro North's New Canaan Branch through the use of special zoning, and also highlighted the Springdale train station area, as one of the key locations for the development of a "town center" which would tie-in with and strengthen neighborhood retail along the adjacent Hope Street corridor.

In a similar way, our planned ferry demonstration project offers a highly cost-effective method of reducing peak period crowding on commuter trains and recurrent traffic congestion I-95 which if left uncorrected would damage the region's competitive economic position, while also enhancing the market potential for a waterfront redevelopment area in the Waterside neighborhood of Stamford. The whole of coastal Fairfield County will potentially benefit from reduced traffic on I-95 as well as enhanced connections with New York City and potentially with Long Island. If the demonstration of a Stamford ferry service proves successful, it would offer a practical model for the Bridgeport Port Authority to follow in their own efforts to implement additional ferry services.

In summary, we hope during the current session to see the Legislature taking an active role to partner in these efforts through the range of bills relating to Smart Growth, and thank you for your consideration of the City of Stamford's views in drafting this legislation.