

SOUTH WESTERN REGION METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION

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CONNECTICUT LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION TESTIMONY ON PROPOSED BILL 425 – AN ACT CONCERNING THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE NORWALK/DANBURY TRAIN LINE

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(SWRMPO)
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My name is Woody Bliss, and I am the First Selectman of Weston, a position that I have held for more than seven years. I am also the Chairman of the South Western Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (SWRMPO). The SWRMPO is responsible for transportation policy and programming in the South Western Region. The SWRMPO is comprised of the Chief Elected Officials of the Region's eight municipalities of Darien, Greenwich, New Canaan, Norwalk, Stamford, Weston, Westport and Wilton as well as representatives from the Norwalk, Stamford and Westport transit districts. I am pleased to have this opportunity to address the members of the Legislative Committee on Transportation regarding **Proposed Bill – An Act Concerning the Improvement of the Norwalk/Danbury Train Line**.

The South Western Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (SWRMPO) recognizes that the Route 7 corridor between Norwalk and Danbury is a important link in the state's transportation network. This corridor provides multimodal north/south connections via the Danbury Branch Rail Line and US Route 7 linking housing and employment opportunities between the Housatonic Valley Region and the South Western Region and New York.

Decades of regional and state long range transportation plans and studies have lead to implementation of some projects that improve **highway operations and safety** in the Route 7 corridor.

On the **rail** side little progress has been made, even though the regional long range transportation plans of the South Western Region and the Housatonic Valley Region have designated Danbury Branch Line improvements as a priority few improvements have been implemented. The Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT) Danbury Branchline Electrification Study, funded through a congressional earmark in 1999 concluded in 2006 and proposed six alternatives for further analysis. This initial study was not enough because an environmental assessment was required which lead to the second study. The second study was initiated in late 2007 after delays in securing state funding, and is now in the data collection and analysis phase, with completion at least 18 months in the future. Comprehensive improvements to the Danbury Branch that include passing sidings and possible extension of the line north to New Milford will then have to be designed, rights-of-way purchased, and constructed if funding is available sometime far in the future.

As priorities and funding were diverted to other projects, the critically needed safety and operations project for the **Danbury Branch centralized traffic control (CTC)** system has languished for more than a decade. The project scope and means of achieving the objective of a modern rail traffic control system has vacillated between putting the communications wires underground (the plowing technique) or overhead. In the last year alone the "overhead" concept flip-flopped to "plowing" yet again, this time with the twist that the project

would be designed and constructed in phases missing the desired objective of operational and safety improvements to the entire Danbury Branch Line. Cost estimates for the full build option are estimated at up to \$130 million or more. As time passes, new requirements emerge that necessitate additional elements, additional design, and additional cost.

The SWRMPO urges the Transportation Committee and the legislature to take action:

- To support funding to advance the Danbury Branch CTC project now
- To direct the CTDOT to complete the Danbury Branch Environmental Assessment expeditiously, and
- To dedicate funding for rail station and parking improvements for the Danbury Branch, the New Haven Line and other rail branch lines.