

Testimony of
Jeffrey Maron of Stamford CT
Before the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee
March 18, 2010

Nomination Hearing for Re-appointment to the
Connecticut Metro North – Shoreline East Rail Commuter Council.



www.trainweb.org/ct

Good afternoon Representative Janowski, Senator Looney and members of the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today.

I would also like to take the time to thank Speaker Donovan for the nomination for re-appointment to the Connecticut Metro North – Shoreline East Rail Commuter Council (the Council) as per Connecticut Public Act 85-239 (now Sections 13b-212b and 13b -212c of the Connecticut General Statutes).

I have been a daily commuter on Metro North for 20 years and am a proud member of the Council. I would like to bring to your attention a number of issues that the Council has been focusing on and then answer any questions that you may have.

M8's

First the good news – weary taxpayers have finally started to receive the first pairs of the new "M8" train cars and CDoT is now performing "static" testing on them in New Haven. This is a journey that began in earnest back in 2005 and is just now reaching the point where rail customers can begin to see tangible benefits.

While we all anticipated that the new cars would begin to arrive in Summer 2009, they were unfortunately delayed. In October of 2009, Howard Permut, President of Metro North, indicated to the Commuter Council that the first two cars would be shipped from Japan on October 28, 2009 and indeed they were unveiled by Governor Rell on December 24, 2009.

There will be an additional set of two cars delivered per month until the initial 8 cars have been received. Then Metro North will put together an 8 car train and begin dynamic testing for six months. If all goes well, we expect the first new cars to be in passenger service by the end of 2010. From April/May 2010 forward we should begin to receive

additional cars every month on an increasing schedule until we receive up to 10 cars per month of the initial 300 car order.

Just prior to the initial agreement by the Legislature and the Governor to fund the M8's, CDoT embarked on a Critical System Replacement (CSR) program to greatly extend the life of our M2's – the oldest passenger rail cars in use on the New Haven line.

Commuters and taxpayers alike have benefited by CDoT's foresight and investment.

~~However, even with all 146 of the M2's having gone through this process, on the average morning 65 train cars in our fleet are out of service and we are short train cars on one out of every ten trains (2009 average AM and PM peak). The net result of this is standing conditions for commuters on many rush hour trains. Though it didn't feel that way to many standees on trains, ridership was down by 4% in 2009. Anecdotally, we were hit hard from the loss of the discretionary non-peak riders who buy single ride tickets, the most expensive kind, thus creating a revenue shortfall. That said, we still had 36,314,980 individual "rides" composed of approximately 55,000 daily riders in 2009 and continue to provide a very valuable service. Moreover, despite the numbers of cars out service, the riders on trains arrived at their final destination on time (within 5:59 of schedule) 97.6% of the time in 2009.~~

This brings me to my second point – how do we pay for the new cars and alleviate crowding? Riders were promised that we wouldn't have to pay the 1.25% fare increase for the new train cars until we could use them. That day is rapidly approaching. And concurrent with that increase, given the current deficit that we face in Connecticut, there may well be another fare increase. CDOT has already scheduled, and then cancelled, public hearings for the Governor's fare proposal. The required public hearings and notices for a future fare increase will take 4-6 months to implement and we are only delaying the inevitable. But we are not the only state facing this challenge. NY has recently tried to off load their deficit onto the backs of Connecticut. We greatly appreciate CDoT and the Governor's clear message that they would not agree to the MTA's plans to cancel our trains and reduce our service.

I would like to suggest that we revisit the plan to "name" stations by advertisers that was floated in September 2007. I raise this point without prior consultation with other members of the Council and without their needed support, but only to suggest that we continue to examine non-traditional methods of generating revenue. We know that we can't continue to fund CDoT through ever increasing tax increases and fare increases – both are ultimately self-defeating.

Parking

Although some Connecticut residents may choose to live near their local train station, most people can not. Thus, station parking, and the lack thereof, is a very large issue for many residents. In February 2009 Governor Rell asked CDoT to create a Rail Parking Task Force to explore ways of increasing access to train stations. The task force is exploring a series of possible solutions (including car-pooling and decking, among others) and mechanisms to centralize parking information so drivers can better navigate among the options that are available today and make educated decisions.

The status of the Stamford garage remains an issue. As the largest of Connecticut's rail stations in terms of volume, parking is at a premium. The "old" garage, containing 880 spaces, has been plagued with problems since its delayed opening in 1987. CDoT took responsibility for the garage on 2000 and in 2003-4 opened the \$30,000,000 "new" section with 1,100 spaces, built around two sides of the old garage. In a 2006 assessment of the facility, CDOT concluded that the old garage was safe for commuters to use but that it was necessary to begin the process of developing plans to replace the garage. That process is still ongoing with no clear solution in sight. RFEI's have been issued, plans floated for transit oriented development, and we have been told that it will be less expensive to tear down the old portion of the facility and build a new one (where?) than to repair it in place. Yet throughout this process the voice of the frequent commuter and Amtrak passenger alike has been rock solid – we need a parking facility at least as large as the current one on the site of the current one at the station. A quarter mile walk in the rain or snow with luggage or a stroller is not a viable alternative and should not be seriously considered.

Communications

Although things work extremely well 97.6% of the time, when things inevitably do go wrong on the trains, our passengers deserve timely information. If service is disrupted, PA announcements (on trains and at the station) should be made and e-mail updates / media alerts should go out quickly so that our riders can make their own informed choices about their travel. Unfortunately, all too often this does not happen. The Council has been raising this issue as far back as anyone can remember.

Private enterprise has stepped in and a NJ firm called Clever Commute has been providing peer to peer messaging with real time train conditions to riders. They also provide email and text messages to riders with track assignments at Grand Central Terminal. These messages are sponsored by advertisers and Clever Commute is doing well. This service only exists because Metro North would not/did not provide it.

Metro North has recently begun making some progress and the "train time" program is off to a limited start. However, their sister railroads, both LIRR and the subway system, have successfully provided their riders with more information on a faster, more consistent, basis. We urge Metro North's communications team to adopt the protocols and standards that their peers have achieved.

I raise this issue today with the knowledge that the solution is outside of Connecticut's hands. But I do so to illustrate one of the many reasons that we need to renegotiate the master agreement between New York and Connecticut for Metro North.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to raise just a few of the issues that we address on the Council for both main line and branch line riders. A full accounting of our efforts in 2009, along with write ups on the major areas of our attention, monthly Operational Reports from Metro North and our meeting minutes can be found at www.trainweb.org/ct/2009AnnualReport.pdf.

Jeffrey Maron, lives in Stamford, CT with his wife and four children. He has been a daily commuter to New York for 20 years and is currently the Head of Administration, E-Commerce at GFI, a leading global inter-dealer broker. Previously he held roles of increasing responsibility within the financial services industry, most recently as Head of the Exchange division at Superderivatives and Chief Content Officer at MoneyLine Telerate. Currently he is a Trustee at WFHA in Greenwich and has held Board posts at other community non-profit organizations. He also sits on an advisory board to the President of Skidmore College, where he graduated with a BS.