

2/28/11

Transportation Committee Hearings

Senator Maynard and Representative Guerrero, and members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to be here this morning. My name is Todd O'Donnell and I wish to speak in support of HB 5940 – An Act Creating Strategic Plans for Passenger and Freight Rail Service.

I am a partner in the privately-owned Union Railroad Station in New London. I speak to you today as a member of the Shoreline East Coalition - which is comprised of individuals, corporations and academic institutions in southeastern Connecticut who are working to get the DOT's Shoreline East service extended one more stop from Old Saybrook to New London; and also as a member of the Steering Committee for the Central Corridor Coalition – a confederation of municipal officials and private companies working on connecting passenger and freight rail service along the existing and operating New England Central Line between New London and Brattleboro VT.

Southeastern Ct is the tourism capital of the State. We have a multitude of maritime, waterfront, and casino attractions that draw people from all over New England, New York state and beyond. We know times are difficult everywhere but I can assure you, southeastern CT feels it immediately and directly as people view their tourism dollars as discretionary spending, especially with higher gasoline costs staring us in the face. Here in Hartford you clearly realize the difficult times in tourism as state revenues from the Casino Funds and the hotel tax have declined drastically over the past two years.

We need to get those revenues back up. Improved access to the region's attractions through better rail service is one tangible way to help increase business and therefore tax revenues.

The Shoreline East Coalition is asking that Shoreline East service to New London be put on an equal footing with all other Shoreline East towns, which means a full schedule that includes weekend service as well as midday service. Weekends and holidays are precisely when the majority of our visitors want to come and visit Mystic Pizza or the Seaport. To stop the service precisely when the passengers and tourists want the service makes no sense.

In addition, the Central Corridor Line Steering Committee looks to work with the State to upgrade the already-existing privately-owned New England Central freight rail line and make that a more effective freight service, Connecting CT companies with shipping destinations west of the Hudson River, and also helping the underutilized State Pier in New London become a significant revenue source for the State makes good sense in any economic environment.

Finally, an upgraded New England Central Line would provide passenger service between New London, Mohegan Sun, Norwich, Willimantic, Storrs, and points north in Massachusetts and Vermont. Parents and students from Fairfield Co would appreciate the ability to hop on a train in Stamford, knowing they have a reliable, safe, and economic way to get back and forth to UConn in Storrs.

There are many more compelling aspects to these two initiatives and I would be happy to meet with you in other forums. But, in general, these two passenger/freight rail initiatives would be leveraging already existing transportation assets – whether they are the State Pier, the new Norwich Transportation Center, parking garages, rail stations, or existing rail lines. In difficult times we have to look at how to maximize the return on already existing assets. We believe HB 5940 would help accomplish that goal.