



# OLR RESEARCH REPORT

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## **HARTFORD-NEW BRITAIN BUSWAY**

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You asked about the history and status of the Hartford-New Britain busway and the arguments for and against building it.

### **SUMMARY**

The Hartford-New Britain busway, scheduled to begin passenger service in late 2014, is a 9.4-mile dedicated bus rapid transit route connecting downtown Hartford to downtown New Britain. According to the Department of Transportation (DOT), the busway will “combine the fast, traffic-free advantages of a train with the frequent, direct-to-your-destination flexibility of a bus.”

The project was proposed in 1999 following a study by DOT and two regional planning agencies of the problems posed by rush hour traffic jams and safety concerns in the “Hartford West” corridor: Hartford, West Hartford, Farmington, Newington, and New Britain. At that time, a preliminary estimate pegged construction costs at \$75 million. When construction on the project began in 2012, construction costs were listed as \$342.4 million. The total project cost at the time was estimated at \$567 million, 80% of which is to be funded by the federal government. DOT estimates that it will initially cost about \$10 million a year to operate the busway.

Since 2001, the legislature has enacted several laws providing funds to plan and build the busway.

Proponents of the busway say it will benefit the region by reducing commuter travel time, traffic congestion, and motor vehicle pollution while making travel easier and spurring economic development along the busway corridor. Governor Malloy has said the project, which also will include a five-mile multi-use trail for walkers and bicyclists, will create or sustain an estimated 4,000 construction and 100 permanent jobs.

Opponents of the busway say it is unnecessary, too costly, less desirable than such alternatives as rail lines, and that the money allocated for the busway could be better spent on more critical transportation needs, such as bridge repair.

## **HISTORY**

In 1997, DOT, the Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG), and the Central Connecticut Regional Planning Agency began a study that identified rush hour traffic congestion and traffic safety as major issues affecting the “Hartford West Corridor.” I-84 and the neighborhoods surrounding the right-of-way and nearby roads and rail lines in Hartford, West Hartford, Farmington, Newington, and New Britain. After considering several other transportation options, such as commuter rail, light rail, and highway improvements, the Hartford West Major Investment Study (<http://www.ct.gov/dot/lib/dot/documents/ddotinfo/hartford/hartfordwest/hwcon.pdf>) recommended the busway.

The report noted that the busway “offers the greatest speed, flexibility of service, and ease of intermodal interface ... compared with other alternatives.” The report also found the busway to be the least expensive transit alternative: it estimated its construction cost at \$75.3 million, compared with \$97.1 million for light rail and \$98.3 million for commuter rail.

DOT also cites other benefits. It says the busway (which it now calls “CTfastrak”) will be the backbone of a larger and more efficient web of bus routes and connections throughout the busway corridor, providing direct services to employment, shopping, and cultural centers, including such destinations as the UConn Medical Center, Westfarms Mall, and Central Connecticut State University. More information on the proposed bus service and specific bus routes can be found at: <http://www.ctfastrak.com/index.php/en/program-details/draft-service-plan>.

DOT transit administrator Michael Sanders says the busway will also benefit highway users by reducing congestion and wear and tear on I-84. “If we can extend the life of I-84 without having to widen it for 20 years (assuming we could even accomplish such a widening financially, environmentally, or politically),” he said, “then we have achieved some measure of success.” Even a small reduction in peak-hour trips could have a substantial impact. According to Sanders, “you don’t have to move too many peak-hour trips off the highway to improve its operation and optimize its capacity. Even just taking a couple of hundred peak hour trips ... off the highway onto CTfastrak makes travel easier for everyone on the road and potentially keeps the congestion at manageable levels.”

## **PROJECT COSTS**

### ***Cost Estimates***

The cost of the project has increased substantially since it was first proposed. As noted above, it was initially estimated that the busway would cost \$75 million to build. DOT says it is hard to compare this with later cost estimates, which considered inflation as well as such other costs as right-of-way acquisition, financing, and engineering and inspection services.

The project’s 2001 Final Environmental Impact placed the busway’s estimated total cost at \$145 million if built in 2001, or \$160 million if construction continued through 2004.

In 2005 and 2007, the U.S. Federal Transit Administration (FTA) reported that the estimated total capital cost for the busway was \$337 million and \$458.8 million, respectively. (In its 2005 and 2006 reports on proposed project funding for the following federal fiscal years, FTA took issue with the project’s rapidly rising cost estimates and DOT’s slow progress on the busway, among other things. In 2005, FTA stated the project was “not recommended” because of these concerns, but in 2006 and 2007 gave the busway a rating of “medium” (on a five-level scale from “low” to “high”), saying in 2007 that DOT had made “significant progress” in addressing FTA’s concerns.)

The 2005 FTA report can be obtained here: [http://fta.dot.gov/12304\\_2638.html](http://fta.dot.gov/12304_2638.html). The 2006 report is at: [http://fta.dot.gov/12304\\_2639.html](http://fta.dot.gov/12304_2639.html). The 2007 report can be found here: [http://fta.dot.gov/12304\\_6048.html](http://fta.dot.gov/12304_6048.html). The FTA website for these and other reports is: [http://fta.dot.gov/12304\\_2618.html](http://fta.dot.gov/12304_2618.html).)

The FTA announced in November, 2011 that it had approved a \$275 million federal “New Starts” grant to DOT to build the busway. (Another \$179.5 million for the project comes from other federal sources.)

According to DOT, the final capital cost is \$567,053,000, of which \$454,842,399 (80.2%) will be paid by the federal government and \$112,210,601 by the state.

DOT breaks down the \$567 million as follows:

1. Professional Services: \$122,823,000
2. Construction: \$342,410,000
3. Acquiring Right-of-Way: \$45,143,000
4. Buses: \$20,464,000
5. Contingency costs: \$23,245,000
6. Finance Charges: \$12,968,000

### ***Annual Operating Costs and Fares***

The busway’s projected annual operating costs are based on the projected number of additional hours of bus service. DOT says the busway will add 130,000 bus service hours to the current total of 600,000 service hours. It estimates total annual operating expenses at \$10 million (in 2012 dollars), and states that passenger fares will cover about one-quarter of this amount, leaving about \$7.5 million for the state to subsidize annually.

The fares for the busway will be the same as for the rest of the regional system. (In June 2012, bus fare was \$1.30, with express fares ranging from \$2.35 to \$4.45.) There will be reduced fares for seniors and people with disabilities, as well as discounts for 3-day, 5-day, 7-day, 10-trip, and monthly or 31-day passes.

Construction on the busway began in May 2012. It is being built along a railroad right-of-way between Hartford’s Union Station and downtown New Britain, bypassing local streets and I-84.

## **LEGISLATION CONCERNING THE BUSWAY**

Since 2001, the legislature has enacted five public acts concerning the busway. They are:

1. PA 01-5, June Special Session (JSS), which established a Transportation Strategy Board (TSB) and designated \$50 million for specific projects, programs, studies, and initiatives, including continuing efforts on behalf of the busway.
2. PA 01-105, which allowed DOT to designate the busway as a “design-build” project (i.e., allowing the commissioner to enter into a single contract with a developer that includes engineering, design, and construction).
3. PA 04-177, which, among other things, authorized up to \$2 million from the TSB project account for DOT expenses incurred in connection with certain TSB projects, including the busway.
4. PA 06-136, which authorized a total of \$1 billion in Special Tax Obligation bonding for certain strategic transportation projects, including the busway.
5. PA 07-7, JSS, which authorized up to \$5 million in General Obligation bonds for DOT to establish a transit-oriented development pilot program, and designated as a pilot project commuter station development in all towns on the busway.

## **BUSWAY SERVICE**

### ***Stations***

Commuters will be able to access the busway from 11 stations along the route. There will be three stations in New Britain (downtown, East Main Street, and East Street); two in Newington (Cedar Street and Newington Junction); two in West Hartford (Elmwood and Flatbush Avenue); and four in Hartford (Kane, Park, and Sigourney streets, and Union Station). Platforms will be level with the bus floor to allow easy access; passengers will be able to buy tickets on the platforms and enter the bus through any door. Electronic message boards will notify passengers of bus arrival times.

## ***Bus Service and Ridership***

DOT says shuttle buses, making all stops, will make the trip from Hartford to New Britain in 20 minutes, cutting current bus travel time by at least half. Buses will operate 21 hours a day, every day, from 4:30 a.m. to 1:30 a.m. During peak hours, a bus will arrive every three minutes to six minutes along the two-lane busway, with about 20 buses traveling in each direction. After reaching the end point of the route (either downtown New Britain or Hartford's Union Station), the buses will circulate throughout downtown New Britain or Hartford, respectively.

DOT says the bus network will offer riders a "one seat ride" – direct service to a destination without the need to transfer. "The One Seat Ride service plan will be possible through a new system of transit routes, including express commuter routes, as well as local, connector, and circulator routes, to link key employers, neighborhoods and activity centers with the CTfastrak line," the department says. More information about one seat ride can be found at: <http://www.ctfastrak.com/index.php/en/news-center/feature-articles/94-what-is-a-one-seat-ride>.

DOT says residents of Bristol, Cheshire, Plainville, Southington, and Waterbury, beyond the busway's western end, will be able to connect with the busway by boarding buses in those communities, saving them the drive to New Britain.

DOT projects that there will be about 16,000 boardings of the busway by 2030, about twice the number of current daily boardings on all bus routes in the corridor west of Hartford. DOT says it expects to reach the 16,000 figure long before 2030, and expects to average about 5,500 additional daily boardings in the busway's first year of operation.

DOT's Sanders notes that not every busway rider will be new to public transit. He said he expects that about half the people using the busway will have ridden buses previously. The difference, he said, is that "we are providing faster and more convenient transit service to our existing riders as well as an alternative for people who may now not have to buy a car to get around, or can leave their car at home and not use the highway for at least some of their travel needs."

## **LEGISLATIVE DEBATE ON THE BUSWAY**

The Senate and House debated the merits of the busway on April 26 and May 7, 2012, respectively, when Senator Markley and Representative Betts introduced amendments (LCO # 3613, amending SB 289, and LCO

# 5194, amending SB 33, respectively) that would have required DOT to halt busway construction and instead use state bond funds appropriated for the busway to improve deficient bridges and roads. The Senate amendment failed by a 19 to 15 vote. The House amendment failed on a vote of 82 to 64.

In discussing the proposed amendments, Senator Markley, Representative Betts, and others raised a number of objections to the busway. Among other things, they contended that:

1. the money proposed for the busway would be better spent on other, more critical, transportation projects, such as bridge repair;
2. the cost of the project has increased dramatically from the original estimates;
3. the busway is too costly for the projected economic, travel, and environmental benefits it will bring;
4. the number of additional riders the busway will benefit does not warrant the project cost;
5. a rail line would have been a better alternative;
6. state residents do not support it;
7. it will be hard to persuade commuters to forego their cars for the buses;
8. some of the construction jobs were awarded to out-of-state firms;
9. residents would have to subsidize busway operations, and
10. legislators should have had more of an opportunity to review the project's costs and merits.

In making the last point, Senator Roraback cited a December 9, 2010 letter from Transportation Committee co-chair DeFronzo to committee members, in which Senator DeFronzo noted that the cost of the busway had almost doubled between 2006 and 2010. The DeFronzo letter is available at: <http://www.courant.com/media/acrobat/2010-12/58220660.pdf>.

Supporters of the busway countered that:

1. it will revitalize the New Britain-Hartford corridor, leading to new jobs and business growth and reduce traffic congestion, travel time, and motor vehicle pollution;
2. most of the federal money appropriated for the busway could not be used for other purposes, and rejecting that money might jeopardize future federal transportation grants;
3. the busway is more flexible and less expensive than rail and would improve transit services through the Hartford-New Britain corridor; and
4. the busway will provide less costly transportation alternatives for low-income residents and students.

A transcript of the House debate is available at:

<http://search.cga.state.ct.us/dl2012/TRN/DOC/2012HTR00507-R00-TRN.DOC>. A

transcript of the Senate debate can be found at:

<http://search.cga.state.ct.us/dl2012/TRN/DOC/2012STR00426-R00-TRN.DOC>.

## **MORE INFORMATION**

DOT's busway web page (<http://www.ctfastrak.com/index.php/en>) has a number of links on the busway status and history.

A CRCOG slideshow on the busway can be found at:

<http://www.crcog.org/publications/TransportationDocs/NBHBusway/buswayexecbriefing.pdf>

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