



State of Connecticut

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STATE CAPITOL

REPRESENTATIVE GAIL LAVIELLE
ONE HUNDRED FORTY-THIRD ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

LEGISLATIVE OFFICE BUILDING, ROOM 4200
300 CAPITOL AVENUE
HARTFORD, CT 06106-1591

CAPITOL: (860) 240-8700
TOLL FREE: (800) 842-1423
Gail.Lavielle@housegop.ct.gov

RANKING MEMBER
COMMERCE COMMITTEE

MEMBER
APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
EDUCATION COMMITTEE
HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT
ADVANCEMENT COMMITTEE

Testimony in Support of HB 5180 and HB 5253

HB 5180: An Act Authorizing Bonds of the State to Electrify the Danbury Branch of the Metro-North Railroad

HB 5253: An Act Studying the Sale of Land Acquired by the Department of Transportation for the Purposes of Improvements to Route 7 and the Use of the Proceeds of such Sale to Upgrade the Danbury Branch of the New Haven Commuter Railroad Line

Transportation Committee

February 4, 2013

Good morning, Chairmen Maynard and Guerrero, Ranking Members Boucher and Scribner, and former fellow members of the Transportation Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of HB 5180 and HB 5253.

Both bills address electrification of the Danbury Branch of Metro-North's New Haven Line, but each suggests a different method of funding – respectively, bonding and sale of state land. Whatever funding means is chosen, the need is great, and the objective of both bills is to pursue the upgrading of the Danbury Branch Line.

Of the Metro-North branch lines, the Danbury Line is the one where this investment would have the most significant effect on improving service and has the greatest potential to increase ridership. It connects two of southwestern Connecticut's major cities, Norwalk and Danbury, and all the towns in between – Bethel, Redding, Ridgefield, and Wilton. It is also close enough to many other adjacent towns to serve significant segments of their populations, and is therefore a major regional artery.

It is important to note that the Danbury Line is used not only by outbound commuters to New York. It accommodates substantial inbound traffic, and is also heavily used by people who live in greater Danbury and commute to Norwalk and Stamford.

The Danbury Line is perhaps the most antiquated rail line in the country. When the project of upgrading its signal system, now underway, is completed, it will no longer be necessary for someone to pull a switch manually to allow two trains to pass each other. This will make more frequent service possible. The line still uses diesel powered trains that push train cars to New York City and pull train cars to Danbury, which slows service down significantly.

It is not necessary to electrify the entire line at once. One of the options proposed in Phase II of the Danbury Branch Line study was electrifying the line in segments, and given the state's limited financial resources, that would seem the best way to proceed. It is likely that funding in the range of \$40 million would cover an initial segment.

Electrification of the line would lead to several benefits, including:

- Increased travel speed
- Compatibility with main New Haven Line
- Eventually, more through trains from Danbury Line towns to Grand Central and back

For transit projects currently underway or being planned in central Connecticut, ridership projections are speculative. For the Danbury Line, demand exists and is well documented, with several hundred thousand passenger rides each year already.

Projections by the DOT indicate that continuing improvements would substantially increase ridership. Currently, many commuters in the Danbury Line towns either do not take the train, or drive to stations in Westport, New Canaan, South Norwalk, and New York State to take the train. More frequent, faster, and more reliable service would provide incentives for these commuters to use the stations where they live. Their use of stations elsewhere adds to traffic congestion and vehicle emissions and crowds the parking lots at the main line stations. Improving the line will favorably affect property values, attract businesses and homebuyers, and be a catalyst for economic development. It will also facilitate access to qualified workforce members residing in towns along the line. Increased ridership will, of course, increase revenues from fares. Further upgrades now on the New Canaan Branch Line, which is already electrified and compatible with the main line, is not likely to produce the same results in terms of increased ridership.

This is a critical infrastructure investment that would bring immediate benefits, and would not only help the region and the state now, but would also position Connecticut's most economically active area to accommodate more businesses and services when the economy improves.