

Name: Tanner Thompson

Title: Chair

Organization or Agency: Norwalk Bike/Walk Commission

Topic: SB00630 - AAC THE NORWALK TRANSIT DISTRICT.

General Comments

Testimony:

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee: My name is Tanner Thompson. I'm a Norwalk resident, regular bus and train rider, chair of the Norwalk Bike/Walk Commission, and participant in the Norwalk Transit District Passenger Advisory Committee. I also work professionally in the transportation data space; I'm a software engineer at Google and work on transportation features in Google Maps. I'd like to testify regarding Proposed S.B. No. 630 AN ACT CONCERNING THE NORWALK TRANSIT DISTRICT.

In my experience, the service that the Norwalk Transit District provides is punctual and reliable. Their buses are clean, and their drivers are friendly. At the same time, making a journey across town on the bus is often much slower and less convenient than driving, due to the infrequency of the service and the sometimes indirect bus routes. I even find that riding my bike is often faster than taking the bus! Of course, the bus doesn't need to be as fast as driving to serve the people it's currently serving - a reliable way to get to work, without having to pay for car ownership, is all that some people need. But, bus service in Norwalk could be so much more.

If (1) buses came more often, (2) routes were planned according to existing and future development, through strong collaboration with the City of Norwalk, bus service would be an effective tool to help more people drive less, which would make Norwalk streets safer, less congested, and more sustainable.

Our Norwalk delegation has proposed SB630 to dissolve the Norwalk Transit District and have CTTransit take over transit service in Norwalk. I appreciate the attention being paid to our local bus service, and the shared desire for improvement - however, I think this conversation needs more detail before we should pass a bill like this.

Senator Duff has said this would eliminate the inefficiencies inherent to operating such a small transit district like Norwalk. I think there is theoretical merit to this idea - however, I haven't seen any hard numbers or estimates that show what savings could be had.

Additionally, I worry that the bill will exacerbate the second issue, that of route planning. Moving the governance of a transit agency from a local level to a state level inherently involves a trade-off between regional expertise and local familiarity. As much as CTTransit may do a better job of servicing regional routes, I think it's a reasonable concern that they won't meet the local needs of Norwalk as well as an agency with a smaller scope.

I'm not the only one with that concern either - Norwalk's draft Transportation Master Plan, released in December, identifies a need for "legislative advocacy to maintain transit districts".

Many have argued that the Norwalk Transit District isn't currently meeting the local needs of Norwalk - and I agree. I've heard that it's been decades since the existing route network was substantially updated. To that, I give two reasons to be optimistic. First, in November, the Transit District put out an RFP on a Comprehensive Operational Analysis - potentially a route network redesign. The RFP closed last month and the contract should be awarded within the week. Second, as of last month, the Transit District has a new CEO, Matt Pentz, whom I have worked with in my role as the Chair of the City's Bike/Walk Commission and am excited to see take the lead. Matt has been very proactive in improving the rider experience and collaborating with City agencies - two things that are desperately needed.

If CTTransit could run more buses, improve the route network faster, and collaborate with the City of Norwalk better than the Norwalk Transit District, then I would be the first to support this bill. However, between the encouraging recent developments at NTD and the paucity of detail on a theoretical CTTransit merger, I am skeptical.

How can Norwalkers be confident that it won't lead to a more distant authority providing the same reliable but underwhelming service? What do the City leaders - the Mayor and Common Council - think of the proposal? Why shouldn't the proposed dissolution happen by action of the Common Council, as the current state law provides for?

Lastly, I'd like to address the issue of regional connectivity. Some have argued that merging operators is needed to improve regional bus service. Norwalk already has bus service to many neighboring towns - routes to Stamford, Wilton, Danbury, and the Coastal Link to Milford via Bridgeport. The issue isn't that regional connections don't exist - it's that between these four routes there are five different operators - which makes for a poor passenger experience.

Instead of merging operators, we could choose to follow an international best practice that originated in Germany - the "Verkehrsverbund", or transit association. The transit association functions as a middle layer between operators and riders, unifying the route maps, schedules, websites, apps, and even fare structures of all transit operators they represent. With a region-wide or statewide Verkehrsverbund, riders would be able to use one app and buy one ticket to plan and take a journey. I'm encouraged to see elements of this approach in other bills currently being considered by the legislature, such as SB 1079.

I support any measure that the public can be confident will improve bus service and rider experience in Norwalk.