

TESTIMONY OF JAMES S. BUTLER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
SOUTHEASTERN CONNECTICUT COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS  
BEFORE THE UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON BANKING, HOUSING,  
AND URBAN AFFAIRS  
Field Hearing, New Haven, CT, 16 April 2009

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, my name is Jim Butler and I am the Executive Director of the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (SCCOG), which represents twenty municipalities in the southeast corner of the state. We are the region's Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), which under federal surface transportation law makes us responsible for planning transportation improvements in our region. Thank you for convening this field hearing in Connecticut, and for asking me to participate as a witness.

I have been asked to provide perspective on a number of transportation issues facing our region including:

- Transit needs in southeastern Connecticut
- Congestion of traffic on highways from tourism and other factors
- Intermodal facilities in the region
- Extending Shore Line East from Old Saybrook to New London
- SCCOG's Proposed Tourist Transit System
- How to improve the transportation system with transit in southeastern Connecticut

*Transit Needs in Southeastern Connecticut/Congestion of Traffic*

While our region is particularly well served by highways, southeastern Connecticut is somewhat transit poor. That this is the case is a function of history, geography, and our population density. However, times are changing, and over the past twenty years there has been an increasing demand for more transit service to, from, and

within southeastern Connecticut as two of the world's largest gaming facilities were constructed, new shopping centers and subdivisions were built, roads became more congested, and fuel prices began to increase. Traffic on some of the region's major state highways has increased by as much as 150% depending upon the highway's location, and at certain times of day or in a particular season a significant number of the region's roads have Volume to Capacity ratios in excess of 1.0, meaning they are congested to the point that the amounts of traffic they are carrying exceed the capacity of the road. All this means that the region needs more transit, and while the Southeast Area Transit (SEAT), our region's bus provider, capably serves its nine member towns, it is a small system with low service levels that primarily serves the region's transit-dependant population and is not considered a viable alternative by those who still can afford to travel by private automobile. Both casinos do offer privately operated transit alternatives to their patrons, but they still attract thousands of visitors daily that travel to the region by automobile at all hours of the day and night. In addition to SEAT, there are some small para-transit providers in the region, but these are intended to provide transportation services to the elderly, handicapped persons, and other persons that do not have access to a private automobile.

#### *Intermodal Facilities in the Region*

The southeastern Connecticut region has long been blessed by the location of a number of transportation providers in proximity to one another in New London. We have called this confluence of modes the region's Intermodal Transportation Center where high speed and conventional rail, ferry service to Block Island, Long Island, and Fishers Island, long haul bus, taxi service, and public and private parking facilities all serve the

travelling public. However, the transportation services are all independently owned and operated so there is little coordination between them that could make this a world class transportation center. Recognizing this fact, the SCCOG and the Connecticut Department of Transportation (CONNDOT) initiated a study last year that is about halfway complete, that will identify physical and operational improvements to tie all these modes of travel together, making it more convenient and safer for passengers. To compound the fragmented nature of these transportation services, Union Station, the historic and architecturally significant railroad station around which all the modes are located, is privately owned, the only privately owned station along the shoreline rail corridor in Connecticut. This is a problem because while the current owners of Union Station may wish to see the building remain as a transportation center, they need to have the building generate revenue to pay for their capital investments and ongoing operating costs. The SCCOG has had discussions with CONNDOT, and intends to continue to do so, about the State of Connecticut either owning or creating some kind of public-private partnership that will guarantee that this beautiful building remain a transportation center for many years to come.

In addition to the existing facility in New London, a second intermodal center is planned in the City of Norwich, with construction scheduled to begin later this year. This project will create a new facility for SEAT buses just outside downtown, and will also provide parking for several hundred automobiles. With its location on Hollyhock Island, it has the potential to serve rail and provide access to the Thames River.

*Extending Shoreline East from Old Saybrook to New London*

Shoreline East currently operates limited service beyond Old Saybrook to New London. Earlier this year, at the region's urging, CONNDOT successfully convinced AMTRAK to allow Shoreline East fares on some AMTRAK trains if a multi-ride ticket is purchased. While this is a start, the region is hopeful that CONNDOT will very soon solve the impediments to bringing more commuter trains to and from New London. In an editorial in *The Day* newspaper this past Sunday, CONNDOT Commissioner Joseph Marie was commended for his effort toward this end, and the region is grateful. But the region will continue to urge the State of Connecticut to reach an agreement with the marine interests concerning the requisite bridge closings (currently limited to a maximum of 39 AMTRAK, two Shoreline East trains, and two freight trains per day as required of AMTRAK in 1996 when the rail line was electrified), and to negotiate with AMTRAK, the owner of the railroad, concerning the upgrades required to accommodate additional trains on this stretch of rail line. The southeastern Connecticut region needs, deserves, and warrants train service commensurate with the Metro North service that CONNDOT provides in the southwest corner of the state because the region's tourism base is vital to the health of the State's economy.

*SCCOG's Proposed Tourist Transit System*

In 2005, SCCOG completed a study named *Intermodal Connections Study Southeast*. This study developed a business plan for a high-quality, dependable, seamless, bus based transportation system linking rail, ferry, and buses to the region's major tourist centers. A market analysis that interpreted the results of visitor surveys conducted during the course of the study projected that enough visitors would use the system to make the

investment in the system pay for itself. The study concluded that more people would visit the region, their length of stay would increase, and people would visit more attractions if linkages were better. A ridership between 1.7 to 3.5 million people annually was projected. Because the major beneficiaries of the system, the casinos and other major tourist attractions, could not easily be convinced to pay for the system's \$24 - 31 Million start-up capital cost and annual operating cost of \$6.5 - \$8.6 Million, the study recommended the conduct of a two-year pilot project to demonstrate to potential funders of the system that it would be successful. This pilot project would cost \$12 Million over the two years. While SCCOG remains convinced that the proposed tourist transit system would be well used and contribute significantly to improving the region's transportation system, to date we have been unsuccessful in identifying the full \$12 Million (in 2005 dollars) needed to conduct the pilot project.

*How to Improve the Transportation System with Transit in Southeastern Connecticut*

Based on my previous comments, it should be clear to see that our region is very desirous of increased transit service in southeastern Connecticut. Our Council of Governments and the region's bus transit provider SEAT are now having discussions about how to expand bus service beyond the nine towns currently served. It is hoped that our study of the region's intermodal transportation center in New London will result in improvements that will allow even more passengers to travel into, out of and through the region safely and efficiently. The full extension of Shore Line East into southeastern Connecticut will provide travelers to and from the region an alternative to an increasingly congested I-95. And if the tourist transit system pilot project could be funded, we are convinced that those private businesses that would benefit from its operation would step

up to the plate and pay for it, similar to what LL Bean does up in Maine. But all of these transit improvements cost money; more money than the State of Connecticut can apply to just one of its fifteen regions. So I guess the bottom line is, the best that we can do is to continue to plan, advocate, and provide support for the region's needs, all the while being patient, until such time as funding does become available to create a better and more transit-oriented transportation system in southeastern Connecticut.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide this testimony.