

Connecticut Department of Transportation

City of Norwalk
Project No. 302-0014
Merritt 7 Railroad Station Upgrade

Public Information Meeting
Norwalk City Hall Community Room
125 East Avenue
Norwalk, Connecticut
April 29, 2015

Minutes

Attendees:

Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT)

Bruce Olmstead, PE – Supervising Engineer, Facilities Design
John Bernick, PE – Assistant Rail Administrator
James Fallon, PE – Transportation Division Chief
Gregory Dorosh, PE – Principal Engineer, Facilities Division
Robert Ike – Supervising Property Agent
Yure Kuljis, PE – Supervising Engineer

Clough Harbour & Associates, LLP (CHA)

Jeff Parker, PE – Project Manager
John Montgomery, PE – Project Engineer
Gary Robinson, PE – Managing Engineer
Erin Randi – Administrative Assistant

Direct Design Enterprises

Jeffrey White RA, NCARB – Project Architect

Public Attendees

Refer to attached Sign In Sheet.

Meeting Overview:

Open House Session

A thirty-minute public open house session began at approximately 6:30 pm and preceded the project presentation. Attendees were encouraged to sign in and invited to review several exhibits highlighting the Merritt 7 station and proposed station improvements. Project team members from CTDOT and CHA were available to speak one-on-one with attendees.

Handouts

A two-page project summary and comment form was made available to attendees.

Presentation

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 pm. Mr. Olmstead, CTDOT's project manager, provided a brief overview of the project and an introduction of the project team members in attendance. Mr. Parker, CHA's project manager, then presented key aspects of the project. Presentation topics included: project overview; station improvements; station architecture; parking considerations; and budget, funding and schedule. Mr. Ike, CTDOT's supervising property agent, provided a summary of the anticipated property impacts associated with the project and described the formal right-of-way acquisition process.

Public Input:

Following the presentation, attendees were invited to ask questions and provide commentary about the project. Several meeting attendees expressed opinions and questioned some aspects of the proposed station improvements and public outreach efforts. Subsequent to the meeting, several additional comments were submitted to CTDOT via email.

Comments and Questions Discussed at the Meeting

Steven Gorenbergh of Wilton, a regular commuter from Merritt 7 station, asked several questions and expressed a number of concerns, specifically:

- Mr. Gorenbergh questioned how stakeholders, particularly train commuters and patrons of Merritt 7 station who reside outside of Norwalk, were notified of the meeting. He also expressed concern that commuters have not had adequate input into the station planning to date. **CTDOT Response:** The meeting announcement was published in several newspapers (including New Haven Register, Connecticut Post, and Norwalk Hour) to cover a wide area of outreach, in accordance with CTDOT procedures. CTDOT will consider other outreach and notification measures for future meetings to better target train commuters and Merritt 7 patrons. Initial stakeholder meetings conducted during the conceptual plan development phase included representatives from the City of Norwalk (Department of Public Works, Norwalk Parking Authority, Planning & Zoning, Economic Development), Norwalk Transit District, Western Connecticut Council of Governments (formerly SWRPA), Metro-North Railroad, and adjacent property interests. It was noted that this public information meeting was the first public opportunity for review and input on the conceptual plan for the station. The design phase will involve additional opportunities for public input.
- Mr. Gorenbergh suggested that reducing parking for the station (from 88 to 63 spaces) and then requiring patrons to pay to park was a bad deal for commuters, noting that parking is currently free for all of the Danbury Branch stations. **CTDOT Response:** As noted in the presentation, future parking initiatives may be undertaken as part of this project or independently of this project in an attempt to provide approximately 220 additional spaces recommended to meet projected future ridership demands at Merritt 7 station. There is potential for these parking initiatives to be implemented as a public-private partnership in conjunction with future redevelopment of the adjacent station area. The introduction of parking fees is a consideration for the future and may be necessary to help offset the cost of parking maintenance and operations at Merritt 7. The presentation noted that infrastructure and space for parking pay stations are being considered during design so that the pay stations can be installed in the future with minimal additional cost and rework. It was noted that parking at several other Danbury Branch stations, including Branchville and Danbury, is not free to commuters.
- Mr. Gorenbergh expressed his belief that station improvements appeared to directly benefit adjacent property interests, particularly Merritt 7, and not commuters. **CTDOT Response:** The station improvements are being developed with consideration to the needs of many stakeholders. Pedestrian, bicycle, bus and automobile commuters, as well as the City of Norwalk, area residents, business owners, employers, and property owners should realize benefits from the station improvements. Job creation and tax revenues that could be realized from future economic development around the new station are other possible benefits.

- Mr. Gorenbergh suggested that CTDOT address leaks in the existing canopy before expending funds on a new station. **CTDOT Response:** Regular maintenance of the station is on-going and existing issues will continue to be addressed by maintenance forces.

An attendee noted that he was informed of the public meeting via email from the Norwalk Parking Authority, suggesting that public notice for the meeting had been circulated by means other than notifications published in the newspapers.

An attendee questioned the breakdown of the stated project budget of \$20 million. **CTDOT Response:** The budget was derived from construction cost data from other recent station projects and was adjusted based on the specific design elements and size of the proposed Merritt 7 station. As stated during the presentation, \$5 million of state funding is currently in place for the project, leaving \$15 million of additional funding that must be secured to construct the station. As currently funded, the design phase (including design, right-of-way acquisition, and permitting activities) can be completed.

Mike Greene, of Norwalk Planning & Zoning, questioned whether parking for the station would be managed by the Norwalk Parking Authority (NPA) or other entity. **CTDOT Response:** Discussions regarding parking management at Merritt 7 station will be on-going as no decisions have been made at this time.

Mr. Greene stated that the City of Norwalk supports the plan for the station, noting that the details have to be worked out. Mr. Greene also suggested that a lot of the history of the station has been lost, noting that the station was not originally intended to be a commuter station, and that Merritt 7 actually built a lot of the station and Merritt 7 was going to build the bridge across the track but there was not enough funding at the time to do so.

Mike Mushak, member of the Norwalk Bike Task Force, stressed the importance of making the station bike friendly and coordinating the station improvements with plans for the Norwalk River Valley Trail (NRVT), which include a multiuse trail along Glover Avenue south of Seir Hill Road/Oakwood Avenue. Specific comments provided by Mr. Mushak included:

- Glover Avenue should be designed to be 30 feet wide, similar to the existing width, to accommodate 10-foot wide travel lanes and 5-foot wide bike lanes. Where bike lanes cannot be accommodated on Glover Avenue, such as adjacent to turn lanes, shared travel lanes with sharrow markings should be provided. **CTDOT Response:** As currently planned, only 2000 feet of Glover Avenue is proposed to be reconstructed. Although 28-foot wide in the station area, which would accommodate two 14-foot wide shared travel lanes for vehicles and bicycles, an alternative to evaluate provisions for a 30-foot wide street in the project area can be considered. It should be noted that the ultimate roadway design will consider the City of Norwalk's position on this roadway.
- Bike lockers, as opposed to covered bike racks, should be provided for added security and protection of parked bicycles. **CTDOT Response:** There is currently no CTDOT policy on bike lockers, though common practice for bike parking at Metro-North stations has favored bike racks. CTDOT will review policy on bike lockers.
- Parking for the station should use reverse angled parking, not pull-in angled parking, as a safer alternative that is gaining acceptance in urban areas including downtown Norwalk where reverse angled parking has been proposed on Wall Street. **CTDOT Response:** Numerous parking concepts evaluated for the station including reverse angled. The use of reverse angle can be reviewed during final design.

David Waters, of Building and Land Technology (BLT), suggested that future bicycle traffic in the station area may be greater than currently anticipated given the surrounding development.

An attendee questioned the extent of property impacts associated with the station improvements.

CTDOT Response: In order to accommodate the proposed parking layout for the station, it is necessary to move the center of Glover Avenue approximately 6 to 8 feet to the west.

Consequently, narrow “sliver” property takings will likely be required along the properties fronting Glover Avenue and within the limits of the necessary Glover Avenue modifications. It was noted that quantifying the area of impact is difficult at this stage because property lines are approximate (taken from tax map information, not boundary surveys) and design is still conceptual. Areas of impact will be determined during the Final Design phase.

State Representative Fred Wilms questioned the potential impact of the station improvements on local property owners and residents. **CTDOT Response:** Glover Avenue will have to be shifted west, requiring some narrow property takings along properties on the west side of Glover Avenue in the project area. In an attempt to minimize impacts to commuters the project will have phase construction and the existing station will remain operational until the new station is available. Access to the station will be improved in the future by accommodating local access from Main Avenue across the Merritt 7 property and proposed overpass.

State Representative Gail Lavielle questioned whether the proposed station plans considered future electrification of the Danbury Branch. **CTDOT Response:** The station improvements can support increased ridership that could result from future service improvements and electrification. Specifically, the proposed 510-foot long platform will allow more doors to open on the train, more efficiently accommodating access for more passengers. Future parking initiatives are designed to expand parking in support of increasing ridership. Also, the proposed station and parking layout includes provisions for accommodating the future installation of infrastructure (such as catenary supports that will carry electrical cables) with minimal impact on the station.

An attendee questioned whether there are any plans to improve track quality on the Branch in the next several years. **CTDOT Response:** Track conditions and improvement needs are regularly evaluated for all lines and improvement programs are on-going initiatives.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 8:05 pm.

Comments and Questions Submitted via Email

- Paul Passarelli (of Solar & Thermal Systems, Inc.) proposed a solar power system for the station area that would provide energy for sale to the utility provider (Eversource) or adjacent customers under a Power Purchase Agreement. Mr. Passarelli stated that as a taxpayer, he feels the cost of the station should be a primary consideration and suggested that adding solar power and selling the energy can create a positive return on expense over the life of the solar power system installation. **CTDOT Response:** Potential opportunities for green installations will be considered.
- Lori Passoni, a meeting attendee, stated the proposed station design is beautiful and that she was very impressed with the proposed plans. Ms. Passoni also expressed her belief that the new plan is mainly benefitting those who work in the Merritt 7 office buildings and surrounding offices since the emphasis seemed to be mainly on the walkable improvement to the station. Ms. Passoni questioned the proposed parking accommodations and expressed concerns about reducing the number of parking spaces especially when a much more beautiful and efficient railroad station will only make it a more attractive option for added people to drive over and utilize it. Ms. Passoni also suggested that Norwalk town residents should have preference over other commuters from surrounding towns. **CTDOT Response:** Opportunities to mitigate the initial loss of parking spaces will be considered and evaluated in an attempt to meet parking demand.