

Route 7 Transportation and Land Use Study

Public Information Meeting
Monday, March 1, 2010
6:30 – 8:30 PM

Wilton High School - Cafeteria
395 Danbury Road
Wilton, CT

Attendance

Advisory Committee Members and Public who signed in: 65 in attendance

South Western Regional Planning Agency

Craig Lader Study Manager

Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials

Jonathan Chew Executive Director

David Hannon Deputy Director

Connecticut Department of Transportation Staff:

David Head Transportation Planning

Consultant Team:

Susan VanBenschoten Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc.

Carol Gould Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc.

Mike Morehouse Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc.

Leslie Black Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc.

Maura Cochran Bartram & Cochran

Meeting Summary

An open house session was held from 6:30-7:00 PM where attendees could view a variety of boards set up around the room related to the study itself (purpose and schedule), the corridor vision, and technical information related to transportation, land use, and market trends.

Presentation

Mr. Craig Lader welcomed the audience to the first public information meeting for the Route 7 Transportation and Land Use Study. He explained the purpose of the study and emphasized that this study will focus on Route 7 within Danbury, Ridgefield, Redding, and Wilton. *The study will not evaluate the need for an expressway from Danbury to Norwalk, but will instead investigate ways to maximize the efficiency and safety of all modes of the existing transportation system.* Mr. Lader then turned the presentation over to Ms. Susan VanBenschoten.

Ms. VanBenschoten opened her discussion with a review of the study process and thanked the Study Technical Advisory Committee for their diligence in guiding the study and providing feedback. The Study Advisory Committee is comprised of a variety of state and regional agencies, municipalities, and key business and community stakeholders.

Ms. VanBenschoten then summarized the public outreach process. In addition to Study Technical Advisory Committee meetings, she outlined the various methods of public outreach including a study mailing list, comments forms, stakeholder surveys, focus groups, and a study website where meeting notices and study documents are made available: www.route7study.org. The presentation from this meeting will be available on the website. The study website also provides a comments form under "Contact Us" to receive feedback regarding the study. She commented that tonight's meeting was an opportunity to hear public views about the corridor.

Ms. VanBenschoten then presented the 2030 Corridor Vision as developed by the project team and the Advisory Committee. The remainder of the presentation summarized the Existing Conditions findings and covered three topic areas including transportation, land use, and market trends. Various members of the study team participated in the presentation. The study team concluded the presentation by inviting the public audience to ask questions of clarification on the existing conditions findings before moving on to portion of the meeting devoted to small group exercises discussing issues and opportunities for the study corridor.

Public Question and Comment Period:

- Why was the Cannondale station not listed as an area for Transit Oriented Development (TOD)? **The Town of Wilton is just completing a plan of conservation and development that includes this station, so the Town asked that it not be included in this study to avoid redundancy of study efforts (Response by Wilton Town Planner).**
- Why does this study not include the Danbury Mall and Merritt 7 areas of Route 7? **The project does consider the Danbury Mall and Merritt 7 in the market considerations. The formal study area limits (that do not include these areas) are for consideration of roadway improvements.**
- Will traffic counts be taken on ancillary roads? Traffic avoiding Route 7 impacts these roads. **This data is available to the study team and shown in the Existing Conditions Report.**
- Will the study team be looking at choke points for traffic along Route 7? **Yes – congestion and safety issues will be identified during the analysis.**
- Is the development of Georgetown being taken into consideration? **Yes.**
- How will the study team analyze changes in traffic volumes as more trains are added to the Danbury Branch Line? **These impacts will be taken into account with Connecticut Department of Transportation modeling.**
- Look again at Route 107/Branchville morning peak congestion – it is very bad at the intersection traffic light. **It is anticipated that the Branchville area will be a major focus of the project moving forward and the team will take another look at this intersection.**
- Will a utility analysis be done for land use part of the study? **The study team will identify where utilities do not currently exist.**

The formal presentation adjourned at 7:50 p.m. to permit the public to break into small group discussions to brainstorm and discuss transportation and land use issues in the Route 7 Corridor.

Please see the following text for a summary of the various small group exercise findings:

Public Meeting – Small Group Exercise

OBJECTIVE: To brainstorm and discuss transportation and land use issues in the Route 7 Corridor and to begin to brainstorm improvement ideas consistent with the Corridor Vision.

Members of the public audience broke into small groups to discuss the following questions and provide feedback to the study team. The following text summarizes the questions they were asked and their various group responses.

Exercise #1 – 2030 Vision

The **2030 Vision** will help guide the project and direct the Project Team and Advisory Committee towards the types of land use and transportation recommendations that are desired. Please read the 2030 Vision (below) that was developed by the Project Team and Advisory Committee and answer the questions that follow.

2030 Corridor Vision

The Transportation System Will:

- *Provide a balance between local and regional travel needs*
- *Provide multi-modal choices with strong connectivity between modes*
- *Provide connectivity between major destinations*
- *Be safe for all users*

Land Use and Development Patterns Will:

- *Be well defined in form and be focused in clusters*
- *Provide a mix of uses and services that are economically and environmentally sustainable*
- *Allow for land outside development clusters to be preserved*

In general, do you agree with this vision for the Route 7 corridor?

- Yes – balance is the key word here. There isn't anything in this that we don't want.
- Yes – we would add “Be safe and healthy for all users” as the fourth bullet for the vision of the Transportation System.
- Not necessarily – not high density residential cluster development – there currently are no sewers in Wilton or Redding and Ridgefield's is at capacity – no sewers, no housing
- Yes

1) What specific elements of the vision do you most strongly agree with?

- Land Use – encourage different thinking about land uses along the corridor
- Broad stroke look at nodes of development is a good idea
- By looking at land use, this is an opportunity to get a grip on sprawl
- It is not very specific, but connectivity (through improved train and bus service) and safety (fewer places to stop along the highway) would help
- Environmental sustainability is integral to the health of the Norwalk River

2) What specific elements of the vision do you not agree with and what changes would you recommend for those elements?

- Rethink design elements for bicycle/pedestrian improvements that are aesthetically pleasing and user-friendly, not just a space along a curb. (West side of Manhattan cited as an example)
- Specify short-term and long-term recommendations in the final study document.
- Unless the above issue is dealt with (sewers)

3) Are there any additions to the 2030 corridor vision you may have?

- Help region adapt to changing patterns of employment and transportation
- Specific reference to the bicycle/pedestrian environment
- The vision of a Greenway, major reduction of truck traffic (which have caused the most significant accidents), protection from the flood zone of existing buildings
- The heritage of this route – its importance since Colonial days – should be reflected in the character of new and restored amenities (Ethan Allen Highway)

Exercise #2 – Land Use and Transportation Issues and Opportunities

The following questions relate to land use and transportation in the study corridor. Your answers will help us understand the most pressing issues as well as your ideas for how to address those issues. Please mark up the map provided to point out specific locations, if appropriate.

Land Use Patterns and Development

- 1) What words come to mind when you think about the existing land use and development patterns on Route 7?
 - Spread-out, rural, buildings with character, low density, erratic, village/mixed, historic, infringing on the river
 - Rezone bordering residential to commercial then establish wider buffers in rear and street front; enhance landscape regulations
 - Too much disregard for the beauty and health of the river

- 2) What would you change about the existing land uses and development patterns on Route 7?
 - Advocate for the environment
 - Anti-blight program, towns buy land/property as they become available
 - Have a vision for state-owned land
 - Do it green!
 - Keep spirit of the corridor/place
 - Would be in favor of more dense development as long as community character is maintained. Need more work force housing.
 - Reduce impervious surface areas to reduce flood risk and pollution
 - Encourage historical awareness

- 3) For residents of Redding, Ridgefield and Wilton, do you have any thoughts about existing land use regulations in your town? Please specify your town.
 - Ridgefield – not in favor of density or multi-family housing
 - I appreciate Wilton’s “adaptive use” regulations for existing buildings along Route 7 in the two-lane area and wherever possible

Transportation Issues and Ideas

- 1) Where are there safety concerns on Route 7? Please describe.
 - High speed traffic coming from Danbury and continuing onto Route 7 where it transitions to 2 lanes is very dangerous. Traffic is still moving at a very high speed
 - Grist Mill area – congested
 - Choke point where it narrows to two lanes north of Branchville
 - No protection for bicycles

- 2) Where are there congestion issues? Please describe your thoughts about the nature of the congestion issues (time of day, cause)
 - Congestion is not bad. Problems in Wilton disappeared with the road reconstruction
 - Belden Hill Road backs up to Wolfpit Road
 - Grist Mill area
 - Need better public transit

- 3) Do you have any ideas about localized roadway or intersection improvements that could address the safety or congestion issues in the corridor? If so, please specify.
 - Interested in traffic counts to justify roadway improvements

- 4) What are your thoughts about providing more pedestrian facilities (sidewalks, crosswalks, etc.) along Route 7? Please indicate the locations where you feel more pedestrian facilities are needed.
 - Bikes and pedestrians need more and better facilities. Clearly they are necessary in areas of greater activity. People do ride along Route 7, but an off-road trail would be preferred.
 - Consider areas of major construction and then move outward.
 - Cannondale/Branchville alongside the river for pleasant walk.

- 5) What are your thoughts about providing more bicycle facilities (bike lanes, off road trails, etc.) along Route 7?
 - Very much in favor of a multi-use path adjacent to Route 7
 - Yes! But please add more than just a paint stripe along a curb
 - The more the merrier

6) The Connecticut Department of Transportation is evaluating ways to improve commuter rail service on the Danbury Branch Line. It is anticipated that this will increase demand for commuter rail services. As such, access to and design of train stations require some thought.

- a) What are the issues associated with train station access (such as parking, congestion near stations, pedestrian access, secure bike parking)?
 - Need better bus stops and connectivity to businesses and the train

- b) What do you think would improve access to stations? Feel free to be specific to the train station you are most familiar with.
 - No comments

- c) Are you currently a user of the Danbury Commuter Rail? Would you consider using the Danbury Branch when the service is improved?
 - Yes, transit should be subway frequency

7) How do you feel about the bus transit services available to you? Are there improvements to bus service (i.e., more frequency, local shuttle services, etc.) that you think would provide more and better options? Would you consider using bus services if such improvements were offered?

- Use the term “jitney”; nobody wants to ride a “BUS”. Envision attractive electric jitney routes.

Exercise #3 - Summary

Please list the top three concerns you have about Route 7:

Group 1

1. Speed and safety in the Danbury section of Route 7
2. Bicycle and pedestrian safety
3. Protection of the watershed

Group 2

1. If roadway is widened to four lanes, limit development and access
2. Lack of bicycle pedestrian features

3. Protection of the river itself with run-off

Group 3

1. Density
2. Character
3. Lack of parking

Group 4

1. It's all about the asphalt and cars – too bad!
2. The history of the area is unknown, largely
3. The Norwalk River is smothered

Please list the top three changes you would like to see related to land use and/or transportation in the Route 7 corridor.

Group 1

1. Density that fits the character of the area
2. Protect existing businesses
3. Make sure existing streets adjacent to Route 7 are not negatively impacted by new development (e.g. Georgetown area and Branchville)

Group 2

1. Improvement of train/train parking/shuttles
2. Choke points at intersections are priorities (e.g. left turn lane at Route 107)
3. As long as we are thinking about a road and transportation on the road, it is an obstacle to thinking about new options. Consider integration of modes, current lack of connectivity (e.g. when I-Park was built, the Kent Road station did not reopen)

Group 3

1. Smart Access Management and landscape regulations
2. Public transportation – mass transit bus line, reduce auto and truck traffic
3. Embrace current open space and utilize it

Group 4

1. Address auto dependency of the corridor
2. Recognize the history and natural environment of the corridor
3. Make provisions for a beautiful travel experience