

Bulletin No. 87

HOUSATONIC VALLEY COUNCIL OF ELECTED OFFICIALS

3/1996

ACTION PLAN FOR RESTORING PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE TO NEW MILFORD Executive Summary



Pholograph provided courtesy of Bob Rush, New Milford, Connecticut

Prepared for HVCEO by:



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Housatonic Valley Region is currently served by two commuter rail lines, the Danbury Branch of the New Haven Line and the Harlem Valley Line located in eastern New York State. The Danbury Branch extends from South Norwalk to Danbury, a distance of 24 miles and connects to the New Haven Line in Norwalk. Service is provided to eight stations along the single track branch: Danbury, Bethel, West Redding, Branchville, Cannondale, Wilton, Merritt 7 and South Norwalk. Commuter service on both the Danbury Branch and the Harlem Valley Line is operated by Metro-North Railroad. The Connecticut Department of Transportation (CT DOT) owns the trackage and rolling stock on the Danbury Branch and contracts with Metro-North for commuter rail service. (see Figure EX-1, Regional Commuter Rail System)

In the Fall of 1994, the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials (HVCEO) commissioned a study, based on a recommendation in its 1992 Rail Transit Development Program, to examine the feasibility of extending existing commuter rail service on the Danbury Branch, as shown in Figure EX-2. This feasibility study, titled Action Plan for Restoring Passenger Rail Service to New Milford, was completed in two phases. The initial phase, Phase 1, evaluated the feasibility of enhancing and extending the existing service from a ridership and demand perspective. Based on the findings of the Phase 1 effort, the Phase 2 study was undertaken to perform an engineering evaluation of the recommended service extensions. This Executive Summary provides a synopsis of both the Phase 1 and Phase 2 studies, concluding with recommended Next Steps.

The Phase 1 study evaluated two general proposals. The original proposal was to examine the extension of passenger rail service along the 14-mile corridor to New Milford. This proposal was later modified at the request of the Town of Newtown to consider a second option which would extend service a shorter distance northeastward into Newtown. The findings of the Phase 1 analysis include the following:

- The extension of commuter rail service three miles north of the downtown Danbury station to a new station to be located at the junction of Route 7 and I-84 (referred to as Danbury North), coupled with the implementation of currently programmed service enhancements on the Danbury Branch, is projected to generate almost an 80 percent increase in overall ridership on the Danbury Branch in 1999 and an additional 70 percent increase in ridership by the year 2015, as compared to ridership projections for those same years assuming existing levels of service.
- Further extension of commuter rail service 11 miles to New Milford will attract additional boardings. Commuters using the restored passenger rail service to New Milford will be travelling a shorter distance to reach train service and will be avoiding traffic congestion on Route 7. The resulting reduction of automobile travel will also help to reduce air pollution, an important consideration given EPA's designation of "Non Attainment" (below acceptable standards) for the Housatonic Valley Region's air quality.

Based on the findings of the Phase I effort, it was recommended that the Phase II engineering evaluation be completed for a phased implementation plan which provides for an initial three-mile service extension of commuter rail from downtown Danbury to a proposed new station site located at the junction of I-84 and Route 7 (Danbury North), and a future additional 11-mile extension of service to New Milford.

REPORT FINDINGS: DANBURY NORTH EXTENSION

Introduction

The Danbury North Extension involves extending the existing commuter rail service on the Danbury Branch approximately three miles north to a new station proposed to be located at the junction of I-84 and Route 7. This station, referred to as the Danbury North station, would be located on White Turkey Road Extension. Figure EX-3 identifies the location of this proposed station. A site concept plan for this station is shown on Figure EX-4.

Ridership

A number of different data sources were used to forecast the projected ridership resulting from the extension of passenger rail service. These sources were utilized to calibrate CT DOT's statewide travel demand model to project commuter rail ridership levels. As shown in Table 1, the daily boardings at the proposed Danbury North station are projected to be 191 in 1999 and 390 in 2015.

TABLE 1 FORECASTED DAILY INBOUND BOARDINGS FOR EXTENSION OF PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE TO THE PROPOSED DANBURY NORTH STATION

	Downtown Danbury <u>Station</u>	Danbury North Station
1999 Existing Service Levels	253	n/a*
1999 Improved Service Levels	342	191
2015 Existing Service Levels	440	n/a*
2015 Improved Service Levels	483	390

^{*} Assumes Danbury North station is not opened.

Station Site Selection

Three sites were considered for the proposed Danbury North station. These sites are shown in Figure EX-3. Each station site was evaluated based on a standard set of criteria. The Site shown in Figure EX-3 was ranked highest due to:

- superior vehicular access off I-84 and Route 7 and the existence of an existing, under utilized, 100+-space CT DOT Park and Ride Lot, which is paved, stripped and lighted
- minimal known or suspected existing environmental concerns
- an operationally suitable location that will not have an adverse impact upon existing rail freight operations
- the ability to construct a safe, convenient passenger station which will be operationally easy to serve
- the potential availability of land (the Park and Ride site is currently owned by the State of Connecticut)

Operations Plan

A basic concept was developed for initial service to the Danbury North station. This concept proposes that the existing passenger rail service of 20 trains per day be extended from its current terminus at the downtown Danbury station to the proposed Danbury North station. This basic service would have the following characteristics:

- All present trains would be extended from downtown Danbury to the Danbury North station. Train service would operate with shorter overall travel times, assuming CT DOT's programmed improvements to the Danbury Branch Line are implemented. Three trains each morning would run through to New York, returning each afternoon. Two trains would remain on the branch. Of the two trainsets on the branch, one would make one daily round trip; the other trainset would make six daily round trips. This would yield a total of ten daily round trips on the branch, similar to the present configuration of the service.
- All existing stations on the branch, plus the proposed Danbury North station, would be served by all trains.
- Service during peak morning and afternoon commuting times would operate at approximately half hour headways for two and one half hour periods. Off-peak service would operate at the current bi-hourly level of frequency.
- No changes in the present Metro-North main line service would be required to implement the proposed service concept.

This basic service concept was chosen for implementation because it has the minimum impact on current operations and has a relatively low cost. More aggressive service designs, with more off-peak and main line service, could be implemented with no additional investment in facilities or rolling stock, if additional operating funds were programmed for the line.

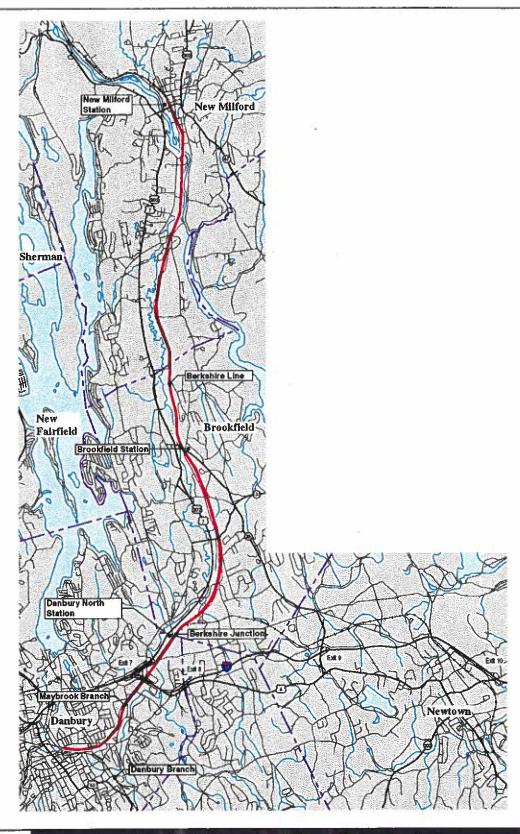
There are several combinations of potential enhanced service concepts which could optimize the Danbury Branch operations that can be investigated further. However, for initial service, only an extension of the existing service is proposed.

Infrastructure Improvements

The following infrastructure, stations, and signal and communication systems would be required to implement the extension of commuter rail service to the proposed Danbury North station, within the proposed basic service concept described above:



Rail System

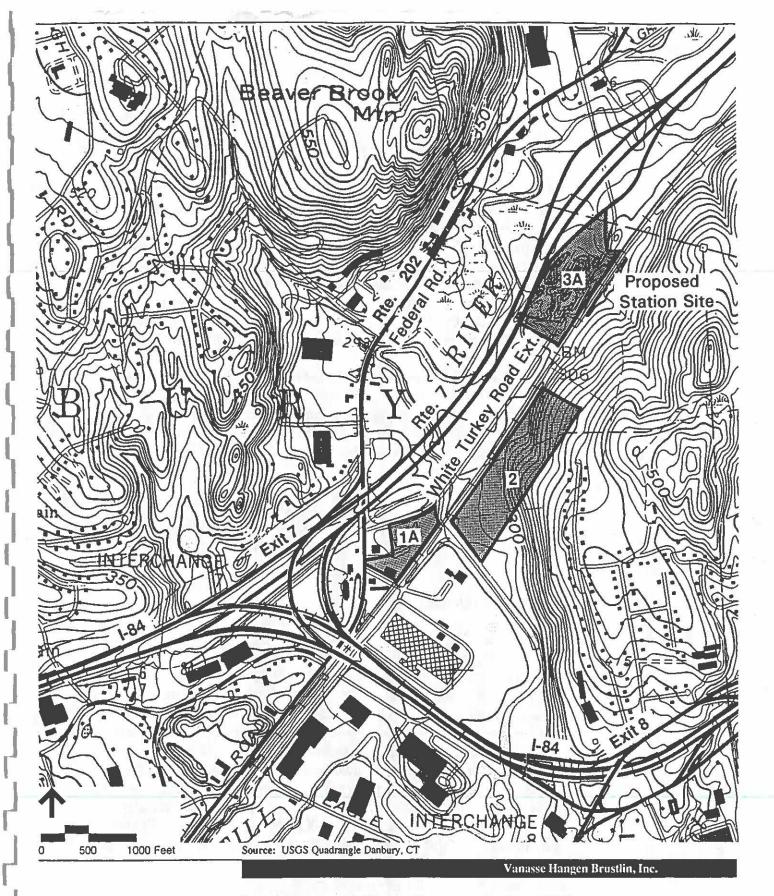




Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc.

Project Corridor

Figure EX-2



Potential Passenger Rail Station Sites - Danbury North Station

Figure EX-3

- Track and Right-Of-Way: The major track and right-of-way components include track reconfiguration in the vicinity of the Danbury station, Maybrook Branch track improvements and Berkshire Junction track reconfiguration.
- Stations: The infrastructure required for the new Danbury North station would include an 1800-square foot station located at an expanded CT DOT Park and Ride Lot on White Turkey Road Extension, with an elevator to a pedestrian overpass over White Turkey Road Extension, connecting to a 500-foot long, high level train platform. A stairway at the south end of the train platform could connect to the overpass leading to the Berkshire Corporate Park, providing pedestrian access to this expanding employment center.
- Signal and Communications Systems: It may be possible to initially
 operate the extension of rail service to the Danbury North station
 without a signal system, as the Danbury Branch Line currently operates
 without signals. However, a signal system similar to the one currently
 being designed for the Danbury Branch is recommended for future
 operations.
- Equipment Costs: Two additional coaches would be required to implement the initial proposed service plan (one for 1999 ridership and one additional passenger coach for 2015 ridership projections).

Economic Evaluation

Capital Cost Estimates

The preliminary capital cost estimate for the proposed extension to the Danbury North station is approximately \$9,100,000 to \$9,900,000 in 1995 dollars. This range is based on Metro-North and Connecticut DOT standard unit costs as well as a review of recent costs within the industry. This estimate includes the cost of track reconfiguration/improvements, a new 1800-square foot station, 500-foot long high level platform, parking lot, a pedestrian overpass, and two new passenger coaches (one for 1999 ridership and one additional passenger coach for 2015 ridership projections). If a signal and communication system was installed, the estimate would increase by \$6,200,000, to total \$15,300,000 - \$16,100,000. Table 2 summarizes the components of the capital cost estimate.

TABLE 2 CAPITAL COST ESTIMATES: SERVICE EXTENSION TO THE PROPOSED DANBURY NORTH STATION

<u>Item</u>	Low	High_
Track and Right-of-Way*	\$3,100,000	\$3,900,000
Structures	\$0	\$0
Danbury North Station	\$3,200,000	\$3,200,000
Signal and Communication Systems	\$0**	\$0**
Equipment Costs	\$2,800,000	\$2,800,000
Totals	\$9,100,000	\$9,900,000***

- * Range is based on Metro North/CT DOT and industry costs.
- ** Cost would be \$6,200,000 for a signal and communications system.
- *** Cost would be \$15,300,000 \$16,100,000 with signal and communications system.

Operating Costs

The estimated incremental annual operating costs for the proposed extension of service to Danbury North would be approximately \$1.3 million. This estimate includes costs for equipment maintenance, engineering, fuel, facilities maintenance, transportation and administrative costs. The operating cost estimate does not include a track usage fee which is subject to negotiation with the host railroad (Housatonic RailRoad Company).

To develop operating cost estimates, 1994 Metro-North operating costs were obtained for the Danbury Branch service from the Connecticut Department of Transportation. These actual Metro-North costs were utilized to forecast the operating costs and revenues expected for the Danbury Branch extension. In addition, an average 120 percent mark-up was used to reflect Metro-North's administrative costs, which typically range from 40 to 200 percent of the actual operating costs. The actual administrative cost is subject to negotiation.

Revenues Projections and Funding Opportunities

Revenue Projections

The estimated increase in revenue from the projected additional riders in 2015 for the Danbury North extension is approximately \$1,480,000 per year, based on the following assumptions. It is assumed that currently proposed improvements to the Danbury Branch will have been implemented. For the year 2015, it is projected that the extension of service to the proposed Danbury North station will attract 277 more

inbound passengers to the Danbury Branch than would otherwise be expected during the same time frame. If it is conservatively assumed that 75% of these new passengers would travel through to New York and that the remaining 25% would make a 30 mile trip (less than half the distance to New York), the increased revenue from the additional riders would be approximately \$1,480,000 per year.

Funding Opportunities

Potential sources of revenue and funds are identified below to support the development and operation of the proposed extension of service. The primary source of capital funding for this extension would be the Federal Transit Administration and the State of Connecticut. FTA assistance would consist of monies from one of two programs: Section 3 or Section 9.

The primary source of funds from the State of Connecticut would most likely be from CT DOT's Special Transportation Fund. Two other potential sources of federal funds are the Surface Transportation Program (STP) and Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ). Both programs were established in the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). Transit projects are eligible for funding under both programs.

Each of the potential capital funding sources identified should be evaluated in more detail as this project proposal is advanced. The likelihood of receiving federal funds under the Section 3 program is dependent upon the available federal funding resources, the number of competing projects nationally, the funding category designated for the project and the cost effectiveness of the proposed project. Grants through the Connecticut Department of Transportation of CMAQ and STP funds will be based on the number of competing projects in the State and the feasibility of each project.

REPORT FINDINGS: NEW MILFORD EXTENSION

Introduction

The New Milford extension calls for extending commuter rail service approximately 14 miles north of the existing downtown Danbury station and 11 miles north of the proposed Danbury North station. Service would be extended to the existing New Milford Train Station. An additional station would also be provided in Brookfield in the future. Currently, this rail corridor is owned by Housatonic RailRoad Company and is used for freight transportation only. The findings of the feasibility study for this extension are briefly summarized below.

Ridership

The proposed extension of Danbury Branch commuter rail service to New Milford will attract commuters destined for Fairfield County job sites located in Danbury, Wilton, Norwalk, Darien, Stamford and Greenwich. The extension of commuter service to New Milford will also provide an opportunity for area commuters currently driving to New York State, to remain in Connecticut and use the Danbury Branch service to access New York City.

New Milford rail commuters will travel a shorter distance to reach train service. They will no longer need to travel to New York State for service on the Harlem Valley Line, nor will rail commuters need to drive the 11 to 14 miles down congested Route 7 to reach train service at the proposed Danbury North station or the existing Downtown Danbury station. This will help to reduce congestion and air pollution along the Route 7 travel corridor now and in the future, recognizing that New Milford is one of the fastest growing towns in Connecticut.

Operations Analysis

The proposed basic service concept discussed for the Danbury North extension would be extended to New Milford. The only difference in schedule is that only nine of the ten daily round trips would run to New Milford because one trainset has to turn back at Danbury North to avoid meeting an opposing train on the single track territory between Danbury North and New Milford.

Infrastructure Improvements

The following infrastructure improvements would be required for an extension of service to New Milford:

- Track and Right-Of-Way: Service between the proposed Danbury North Station and New Milford would require rehabilitation of nearly 12 miles of track to 60 mph standards and track reconfiguration work at the New Milford station. No additional passing siding would be needed to operate this level of service.
- Stations: The existing New Milford station is located near the intersection of Route 202 and Railroad Street. Two tracks exist through the station area. To provide for commuter rail service, a new high-level platform would be located adjacent to the track opposite the existing station. A high-level platform on the existing station track would alter the character of the historic train station and introduce complications in the station and platform design. Rail industry design standards call for a 500-foot long, high level platform, however, it may be possible to provide a shorter platform (100-foot) so as to minimize

the affect on the character of the existing station. Additionally, the existing parking lot would be rehabilitated and expanded slightly to accommodate 250 parking spaces.

- Signal and Communication Systems: Service operation may be accomplished by train orders for the initial extension, however, extension of the traffic control system is recommended for future operations. The signal system would consist of single switch interlocking, 11.5 miles of single track main line without electric locks, cab signal with no wayside except at interlocking, remote supervisory/indication control, and rehabilitation of four crossings.
- Equipment: No additional equipment, beyond the requirements for the Danbury North extension, would be needed to implement the initial proposed plan for the extension of passenger service to New Milford.

Economic Evaluation

Capital Cost Estimates

The preliminary capital cost estimates for the extension of rail passenger service from the proposed Danbury North station to the New Milford station, based upon the infrastructure improvements identified above for operation in year 2015, varies from approximately \$5,750,000 to \$10,650,000. The bottom range is based on a cost estimate prepared by the Housatonic RailRoad Company and the high estimate is a worst case, based on a review of recent costs within the industry. Table 3 summarizes the components of capital cost estimates.

TABLE 3 CAPITAL COST ESTIMATE: EXTENSION OF RAIL PASSENGER SERVICE TO NEW MILFORD

Item	Low*	High*	Housatonic RailRoad**
Track and Right-of-Way	\$8,550,000	\$10,200,000	\$5,300,000
Structures	\$0	\$0	\$0
New Milford Station	\$450,000	\$450,000	\$450,000
Signal and Communication Systems***	\$0	\$0	\$0
Equipment Costs	\$0	\$0	\$0
Totals****	\$9,000,000	\$10,650,000	\$5,750,000

^{*} Range is based on Metro-North/CT DOT and industry costs.

^{**} Reflects cost savings if the track work is designed and constructed by the Housatonic RailRoad Company.

^{***} The cost for a signal and communications system would be \$3,200,000.

^{****} Total costs would range from \$8,950,000 - \$13,850,000, if a signal and communications system was installed.

Estimates include the cost of track reconfiguration/improvements, and a 100-foot long, high level platform and 250-space parking lot at the New Milford station. A station in Brookfield would be added as ridership warrants. If a signal and communication system was installed, the capital costs estimates would be increased by \$3,200,000.

Operating Costs

The estimated incremental annual operating costs for the proposed extension of Metro-North service to New Milford would be approximately \$2,900,000 (including an average 120 percent mark up for administrative costs) above the operating costs for the proposed Danbury North extension. This estimate includes costs for equipment maintenance, engineering, fuel, transportation and administrative costs. This cost would be higher with the installation of a traffic control system along the corridor. This estimate does not include a track usage fee, which is subject to negotiation with the host railroad (Housatonic RailRoad Company).

REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Initial Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that the phased extension of Metro-North commuter rail service to New Milford is warranted. Initially, Metro-North service could be extended to a proposed new station (Danbury North), located 3 miles north of downtown Danbury. Ridership projections indicate that the three mile extension of commuter service to the proposed Danbury North station generates a substantial increase in patronage on the line. The estimated annual revenue of \$1.48 million generated by the service extension covers the projected annual operating costs of \$1.3 million.

This could be followed by the extension of service 11 miles further north to New Milford. The extension of service to New Milford has the potential to help mitigate congestion and air pollution problems along the busy Route 7 corridor.

The proposed extension of commuter rail service to New Milford, combined with the implementation of programmed roadway improvements to Route 7 North, would lead to the creation of a truly balanced intermodal transportation system serving the heavily travelled Danbury to New Milford corridor well into the 21st Century. Restoring passenger rail service to New Milford, one of the fastest growing communities in Connecticut, is a high priority for the Housatonic Valley Region.

Reactions to Initial Report Findings

Report findings were reviewed by the Connecticut Department of Transportation, the Housatonic RailRoad Company, representatives of the three communities directly affected by the rail line and the New Milford Rail Service Restoration Society.

In reviewing the findings of this report, the Connecticut Department of Transportation (CT DOT) expressed a lack of support for the extension of Metro-North Commuter Rail Service to Danbury North and New Milford, citing a perceived overestimation of ridership potential. CT DOT's concerns for ridership projections and responses to those concerns are detailed in the final report of the Action Plan for Restoring Passenger Rail Service to New Milford.

Conversely, the Housatonic RailRoad Company (HRR) and the New Milford Rail Service Restoration Society (NMRSRS) expressed disappointment in the results of the travel demand forecasting, citing a perceived underestimation of ridership potential. The HRR and the NMRSRS felt the methodology employed in forecasting ridership missed many of the potential rail users located in Litchfield County. The NMRSRS also pointed-out that the phased extension of rail service to the Danbury North station, meant that New Milford area residents would still need to drive the congested Route 7 corridor to obtain passenger service.

To address this concern, the NMRSRS conducted an opinion survey of Route 7 motorists in New Milford and Brookfield. The results of the survey, which have been included in the appendix of the final report of the Action Plan for Restoring Passenger Rail Service to New Milford, show a significantly higher level of local ridership support for an extension of passenger rail service to New Milford.

As a consequence of the results of the NMRSRS survey and the expressed disappointment in the original ridership forecasts for the New Milford extension, the project team prepared a follow-up memorandum which addressed the forecasting issues and looked at other similar rail service extensions in New England. This memorandum, also included in the appendix of the final report, documented two actual and one planned service extension on the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's regional rail service in metropolitan Boston, Massachusetts. These three case studies all showed promising results for service extensions similar to that proposed for New Milford.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

With the findings of the Phase 1 and 2 study efforts, the concerns expressed about potential ridership levels available to support the restoration of passenger service to New Milford and the subsequent follow-up efforts by the NMRSRS, the following recommendations for action are offered:

Recommended Action Step No. 1: <u>Implement a 2 Year Commuter</u> Rail Demonstration Project

As interest in implementing new start commuter rail services and expanding existing commuter rail services has increased across the U.S during the past 15 years, one outgrowth has been the establishment of demonstration projects to test potential ridership support. A number of service demonstrations have been developed and implemented in recent years.

It is recommended that a 24 month Commuter Rail Demonstration Project be implemented as an alternative to the immediate extension of Metro-North service to New Milford. The proposed project would provide the opportunity to demonstrate that sufficient ridership exits to justify the extension of Metro-North service to New Milford. This demonstration project could also be timed to coincide with the proposed reconstruction of Route 7 through Brookfield and New Milford to help ameliorate the traffic problems anticipated during construction.

The proposed demonstration project would be designed to provide commuter rail shuttle service between New Milford and Danbury. This service, to be operated with self propelled rail diesel passenger cars (RDCs, or more commonly referred to as Budd cars), would be designed to connect with some or all of the 20 existing Metro-North trains currently scheduled out of Danbury. The estimated capital cost is \$1.1 to 1.5 million to purchase and rehabilitate three RDC units and to make minor improvements to the New Milford, Brookfield and Danbury train stations for improved parking and ADA accessibility.

Additional infrastructure improvements may be required if the existing track and right-of-way of the Housatonic Branch are not sound enough to handle the proposed demonstration commuter service.

The demonstration project does not include implementation of the proposed Danbury North station. If sufficient funding and a long term commitment to continue service to Danbury North station could be obtained, then the station would be included in the demonstration project.

The estimated annual operating cost of the two year demonstration project is \$860,000 for passenger service connecting with all 20 Metro-North trains currently scheduled out of Danbury. Project costs are described in Table 4. Two additional costs would be track usage fees, to be negotiated with the Housatonic RailRoad Company, and the cost of insurance.

TABLE 4 DEMONSTRATION PROJECT BUDGET: CAPITAL AND OPERATING COSTS

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	Quantity	Unit Cost	Total Costs
CAPITAL COSTS:			
Self Propelled Cars:			
Acquisition	3 single units	\$130,000 each	\$390,000
Rehabilitation	3 single units	\$260,000 each	\$780,000
Station Improvements:	3 Station sites	\$50,000 each	\$150,000
Total Capital Costs			\$1,320,000*
ANNUAL OPERATING COS Train Crews: (2 person)	STS: (20 train schedu 4 crews	le) \$125,000 each	\$500,000
Vehicle Maintenance:	3 vehicles	\$60,000 each	\$180,000
Fuel:	Lump Sum		\$80,000
Marketing Program:	Lump Sum		\$100,000
Total Annual Operating Co	sts		<u>\$860,000</u> **
TOTAL DEMONSTRATION	PROJECT COSTS	(2 Years)	\$3.040.000**
		(,	40,0000

^{*} Does not include the cost of infrastructure improvements to track and right-ofway that may be required to support passenger service.

Several potential sources of funding were identified for the Demonstration Project. The best possibilities for funding include the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) program, the Surface Transportation Program (STP) and the Federal Rail Administration's (FRA) Demonstration Program. Additional information related to the proposed demonstration project is included in the previously discussed ridership memorandum, contained in the appendices of the Action Plan for Restoring Rail Passenger Service to New Milford.

^{**} Does not include the costs of track usage fee and insurance.

Recommended Action Step No. 2: Branch Service Scheduling

One of the reasons the ridership forecasts for a full extension of Metro-North service to New Milford may not have yielded the expected results is because the existing Danbury Branch service is scheduled to primarily serve the Manhattan bound work trip. The service is not ideally suited for a work trip destined for southwest Connecticut job sites located in Wilton, Norwalk, Darien, Stamford or Greenwich. It also does not service the reverse commute along the Danbury Branch or the mid-day trip.

As a follow-on to this study, it is recommended that opportunities to service the in-state work trip and mid-day trips along the branch be explored. A number of different service patterns were identified as part of the Phase 1 study effort which could improve service while making better utilization of the existing equipment assigned to the branch. There may also be opportunities to more fully utilize the equipment identified for the service demonstration project that would provide increased service along the Danbury Branch to Norwalk as part of the demonstration program.

Recommended Action Step No. 3: Communication

In today's constrained fiscal environment, every opportunity to control costs should be explored. As the host railroad of any service extension north of Danbury, the Housatonic RailRoad Company (HRR) should be extensively involved in any further planning efforts. The present HVCEO rail steering committee, which includes a representative of the HRR, should work with representatives of New Milford, Brookfield, and Danbury and the Region's elected officials to advance the project. This group should work closely with the Connecticut Department of Transportation to identify the most cost effective approach to implementation of Recommended Steps No. 1 and 2.

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