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CHAPTER TWO

The Challenge of Transportation

WILLIAM B. KENNEDY

When Connecticut residents have traveled to work, appointments, or other sites, they probably have focused primarily on what would happen after they arrived at their destination rather than how to get there. Like many other services often taken for granted, transportation issues usually held less claim to one's attention since they represented but a means to reach a given location and not an end result. This is not necessarily the case today on state roads and highways.

In recent years, Connecticut and much of the U.S. East Coast region from Maine to Florida, along with other sections throughout the nation, have experienced congested travel gridlock to the extent that federal, state, and local government measures to try to remedy the situation have multiplied. Motorist anxiety has grown as trucks, cars, and buses all vie for attention as they inch forward in long lines while special commissions, motorist organizations, and federal, state, and regional bodies all seek solutions.

A small state geographically, Connecticut lies along the major I-95 corridor between New York City and Boston and major North-South highways such as I-91 and I-84 which extend into Massachusetts and northern New England. It is in many ways a "pass through" state for those going elsewhere on weekends, holidays, or other given times as well as for numerous trucks traveling continually on the super highways. One often can observe the resulting traffic congestion, especially in southwestern

Connecticut, by trying to enter the I-95 corridor or Merritt-Wilbur Cross Parkway on Fridays, Sundays, or earlier or later in the week on three-day weekends. Cramped highway entrance-exit conditions, crawling or even stationary traffic, and a variety of non-Connecticut license plates all characterize the scene.

State residents, who far outnumber visiting motorists based on total highway usage, are normally out in force as well for weekend shopping or personal reasons. But their most significant contributions to state traffic congestion have been the morning and evening round-trip home to work and return commute during the week. This is the normal pattern for urban traffic congestion both on U.S. and Connecticut highways. State traffic often hovers close to or beyond road capacity as many commuters travel lengthy distances within a small state or beyond its state line five days per week, and congested urbanized travel conditions are more often the rule rather than the exception. Southwestern Connecticut's I-95 corridor is considered to be the most critical area. But major highways such as the New Haven-Hartford-Enfield I-91 corridor, Danbury-Hartford I-84 corridor, and the eastern Connecticut I-95 corridor are other examples of heavy traffic congestion.

Connecticut secondary highways are experiencing more traffic buildup as well. This often is where heavy suburban commuting starts and continues to grow as it spills over into many of the major state corridor highways during rush hour. Much of the morning commute begins at sites such as Route 111 in Monroe or Route 79 in North Madison and merges with traffic from other entrances onto the major arteries; as a result, it makes superhighways seem like the major culprit for massive commuter congestion when in reality such is not the case. Much like the fish that spawn in small streams and tiny lakes before pouring down wide rivers to the sea, the ceaseless flow of traffic moves from small roads to great highways which, in turn, experience the ultimate unfavorable results most associated with massive congestion scenes.

For a variety of reasons, workers continue moving from Connecticut's largest cities to the suburbs. Recent reports show that state domestic migration trends followed this pattern, with cities sustaining greatest population losses and smaller suburban

communities to be among top population gainers.¹ With national internal U.S. and foreign immigration into Connecticut apparently more than offsetting state emigration losses, if suburbs continue to attract current levels of population growth within the state, more commuting undoubtedly will result.

Long-term major traffic issues in Connecticut thus are mingled with demographic suburban movement, and zoning decisions in affected communities become especially important in their long term implications for the level of commuter traffic. Long-term efforts to address such changing population distribution certainly may require extensive state, town, and regional planning responses in the years ahead.

These concerns are not only a Connecticut problem. A 2001 report "Stuck in Traffic" by TRIP (The Road Information Program) noted that by 2000 an estimated \$7 trillion worth of goods were being shipped nationwide and that changes in the manner of delivering them have increased the numbers of commercial vehicles on U.S. highways.² State truck increases simply reflect this fact. The report further noted that by 2020, under present assumptions, national freight deliveries will probably double. It estimated that from 1982 to 2000, U.S. highway travel increased about 10 times faster than new lane capacity, traffic congestion delays 236%, and highway travel 72%. Yet only 6% new road mileage reportedly was added.

Reduction of truck traffic on state highways has become a significant traffic issue in recent years. Expanding rail carrier traffic, developing more waterborne traffic on Long Island Sound, fully maintaining truck weighing station operations, establishing special truck lanes on major highways, and other solutions have been advanced. Responsible government agencies and other bodies are working on these and other proposals to try to reduce as much truck travel as possible and a period of increased innovation and experimentation with potential solutions can certainly be anticipated as part of any future highway planning.

"Suburbia and the Good Life," a program presented by the Connecticut Humanities Council and Connecticut Public Television in May 1997 on the *Connecticut Experience* television series, showed that the state has been in the forefront of road and

highway development.³ In 1907, the General Assembly approved planning for a state highway system. In 1923, the Post Road was created; in 1938, the Merritt Parkway was approved. By World War II, 3000 miles of paved roads already existed. In the 1950s, the creation of I-95 took place. It was followed in the 1960s and 1970s by an increased state road network as a result of further suburban migratory pressures and general traffic increases. Migration from Connecticut cities to the suburbs has continued to grow to the present day, with increased concern about traffic congestion and sprawl.

Business, commercial, and light industrial facilities relocating in growing numbers to suburban settings often cluster in locations accessible to commercial transportation on secondary roads. New shops and stores draw customers to add to local traffic growth and suburban travel has mushroomed. "Suburbia and the Good Life" presenters point out that more traffic actually moves from suburb-to-suburb than to Connecticut cities and will mean more construction and continuing repairs on secondary roads.

Through systematic annual planning, the state Department of Transportation (DOT) has been working to alleviate traffic congestion. A DOT report citing cumulative progress in the fourth year of a Five-Year Plan for southwestern Connecticut from 1997-2001 noted that 5,987 motorists were attracted to alternatives other than single driver vehicle travel.⁴

The DOT has also been focusing on updating operation of the Metro-North commuter rail system. Through a sales-leaseback arrangement and other funding, it plans to renovate a fleet of obsolete railway coaches to upgrade the carrier system significantly. Harry P. Harris, Bureau Chief for Public Transportation at the DOT, considers it one of the more successful commuter rail systems in the nation in terms of ridership. Acceleration of improvements in basic service through new rail cars, station expansion, and rail coach refurbishing to address commuter concerns are current priorities for state action with funding authorization of \$60 million to purchase rail cars and locomotives. Further funding for equipment, materials, or services for refurbishing and upgrading purposes is being made available through the State Transportation Strategy Board (TSB).

DOT commuter hearings have elicited a number of common concerns, including older rail cars, internal facilities and maintenance problems within the cars, inadequate number of cars during peak periods, and additional difficulties that require major attention. Addressing such concerns is a very important priority for state action.

Amtrak, in addition to its role as a primary provider of intra-city service on its Northeast Corridor route from Boston to Washington, D.C., is playing a central role in rail maintenance and upgrading within Connecticut itself. It owns and is responsible for maintaining tracks, signals, and other such equipment, and upgrading the Corridor route from the Connecticut-Rhode Island border to the New Haven rail yard. It has been a funding partner in many state rail projects, including rehabilitation and reconstruction of the New Haven rail yard and reconstruction of the Stamford Intermodal Transportation Center.⁵

Amtrak further funds a new interlocking system in Fairfield that will permit its trains to pass the more slowly-moving Metro-North trains. As contract operator for the Shore Line East commuter railroad, it supplies crews and currently maintains equipment, owns and maintains the track over which SLE operates, and owns the land upon which SLE stations are built. It further owns the corridor from New Haven to Springfield, Massachusetts, operating and maintaining trains on this route which is used by many of Connecticut's short haul freight railroads.⁶

The DOT currently is updating the State's Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRP) which will cover the period 2004 to 2025.⁷ The Department conducted seven sessions to gather citizen input, and a final plan is expected to be in place by the Fall. The LRP will provide a framework for prioritizing projects and programs of state transportation, which will be updated every three to five years.

The state TSB was established in 2001 to provide future innovative approaches to address transportation issues. Several deal with proposals regarding transportation systems management, commuter and inter-city rail and infrastructure investment, expanded bus services, freight movement, and suggested funding options.

A special session of the Connecticut General Assembly convened on June 30, 2003 resulted in passage of Public Act 03-1, which approved an initial state transportation strategy submitted by the TSB. The Act requires completion of various projects and programs and authorizes more than \$264 million bonding to fund them during a ten-year period. Increases in driver's license, vehicle registration, and certain other fees are to serve as dedicated revenue to help defray the bonding costs involved.⁸

Projects of more than \$1 million normally will be accompanied by an economic development plan requiring analysis of the short and long-term effects of the TSB strategy initiatives on transportation, economic development, and environmental concerns. Priorities stressed include developing public transportation to improve or expand public highway traffic and encouraging employer and employee initiatives to assist in reducing vehicular traffic congestion.

The legislation requires the submission of a variety of annual and special reports from agencies involved to the appropriate General Assembly committees and other appropriate government officials in order to update progress on TSB projects. In addition, linkage of all transportation efforts with the state plan of Conservation and Development to take into account economic and community development needs, patterns of commerce, affordable housing objectives, and land use objectives is a continuing requirement.

TSB objectives involve strengthening and expanding state transportation during the next twenty years to enhance Connecticut's prospects for sustainable economic growth and a premier quality of life in a manner consistent with environmental standards. The Board's work will involve integration of land use with economic and environmental planning, as well as more effective coordination of air, rail, road, and water transportation systems. To reduce single occupancy auto trips, the Board will also explore movement by air, bicycle, bus, rail and ridesharing. Telecommuting and flex-time options will also be explored, as well as targeted road expansion.

With respect to air travel, Bradley International airport in Windsor Locks serves the Hartford-Springfield region and is listed as one of New England's eleven regional airports. It is a

participant in a Federal Aviation Administration regional study to plan for future air traffic in New England and a recent FAA Terminal Forecast predicts that by 2020, the region could have 28 million more airline passengers per year—a 70% increase above present totals. The study is scheduled to conclude its first phase by the end of 2004 and is expected to identify initiatives to accommodate future demand.⁹

A detailed state General Assembly Program Review Committee report on the status of Bradley airport in 2000 focused on expanding its overall value as a regional transportation asset and recommended expanded marketing and increased focus on strategic business planning to help fully develop its future potential.¹⁰ With a recent new parking garage and upgraded terminal facilities, its value as an intermediate and long distance transportation hub for state residents already contributes significantly to Connecticut economic development and it should grow further in the years ahead.

In addition to the focus on rail and air alternatives, developing intermodal transportation centers with rail, bus, water and air connections and auto parking are reflected in TSB funding priorities. Some of these include construction or expansion of rail stations in Stamford, Bridgeport, and New Haven which can accommodate one or more other modes of transportation and provide substantial auto parking spaces; establishing bus or rail commuter service in the New Haven-Hartford-Springfield corridor, including connections to Bradley International airport; and expanding bus service frequency and connections in the Norwich and New London areas in eastern Connecticut.¹¹

Specific funding authorizations for certain TSB programs effective July 1, 2004 include TSB Fairfield County Inter-Regional Bus Service, New Haven Line Commuter Connection, Danbury Area Feeder Bus Service, Shoreline East Service extension in Southeast Connecticut, Jobs Access-Dial-A-Ride, Hartford Area Express Bus Service Projects, and Tweed-New Haven airport.¹²

Besides the diverse ways to expand or sustain alternative approaches to auto occupancy noted above, DOT construction progress on highways and bridges has been continuous. Recent projects include enhancements along I-95 in Stamford and Bridgeport to increase ramp accessibility, bridge replacement over

the Merritt-Wilbur Cross Parkway at the Housatonic River junction between Stratford and Milford, and a major bridge replacement project in New Haven. Additional lane facilities to help with heavy I-95 corridor travel in eastern Connecticut, major I-95 repair in Bridgeport, and several other specific construction efforts to upgrade travel on state highways are also underway.

Telecommuting is growing as a means of trying to reduce commuting numbers. The DOT Five Year Plan four-year report quoted data issued by the Analysis of the Market Facts Consumer Panel that there were an estimated 37,000 telecommuters in Connecticut's southwest corridor.¹³ Future growth will continue to depend upon expansion of appropriate technology and various measures to increase employer interest. Responsible employees whose work can be done at least partly from home can be a central force to reduce commuter congestion and future state public policy should definitely be directed toward telecommuting program growth.

TSB projects to develop alternative transportation options will remain open to regular annual agency and legislative evaluation. Since the TSB mission is to explore innovative ways to strengthen long-term state transportation effectiveness in order to help enhance sustainable economic growth and quality of life consistent with environmental standards, it will therefore be necessary to continually review progress and provide necessary recommendations essential to long-term success.

The state Conservation and Development Plan prioritizes concentrating future commercial and population growth in the major state urban core centers and such an approach may, in turn, result in more commuter accessibility due to greater diversity of public transportation in more heavily urbanized areas. Substantial government actions to expand open space land acquisition throughout the state also may have additional long-range implications for travel limitation in certain areas.

Both federal and state efforts to deal with traffic problems involve a few common questions for decision-makers. In Connecticut, some might be: What share of the state budget should go to transportation in relation to other budget priorities? Should funds be directed largely to growing suburbs or areas of greatest traffic

flow? How should available funds be divided within given modes of transportation such as highways, rail, buses, high-speed ferries, barges, and so on. These and other budget issues will continue to confront policy-makers when decision making takes place.

The federal government will continue to play a key role in trying to help states stabilize their serious congestion problems. Major issues ranging from terrorism concerns to highway, rail, water, and air transportation systems require the U.S. government to play a significant role in helping to resolve transportation problems in Connecticut and elsewhere. The state has been assisted by continued funding for transportation programs and operations but must continue congressional pressure to progress in dealing with current and future demands on its transportation infrastructure. It is always well to remember that congressional legislators face budgetary questions on a larger scale similar to those faced by state legislators. Given the competitive state demands for transportation dollars, the lobbying process in Washington promises to be an exceptionally challenging one.

There is no single magic bullet to reduce commuter congestion in Connecticut. Intensive and diverse projects to ameliorate the situation during future years should focus on highway improvements, alternative methods of transportation, telecommuting, staggered work schedules, linkage to coordinate transportation with economic development, land use, and environmental programs, and constant evaluation by government agencies to assure mission progress. A consistent and expanded planning process to respond to mushrooming vehicular traffic is clearly developing with a number of innovative and promising strategies being employed by both DOT and TSB.

Congestion problems related to "pass through" traffic, commuting from the suburbs, expanded numbers of large commercial carriers, and sprawl can have serious consequences for future state transportation. The average motorist can help by using alternative transportation where conditions permit, sharing rides, or encouraging employers to expand telecommuting to growing numbers of workers. Progressive congestion certainly need not become the norm for future state travel, providing that cooperative planning by all parties becomes the order of the day.

Notes

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1. "State Wins, Loses in Population Shifts," *Connecticut Post*, August 7, 2003, p. 2.

2. "Stuck in Traffic," 2001 Research Report, TRIP—The Road Information Service, Washington, D.C.

3. "Suburbia and the Good Life" May, 1997 television presentation, *Connecticut Experience* series, Connecticut Humanities Council and Connecticut Public Television (CPTV).

4. Interview with Harry P. Harris, Bureau Chief for Public Transportation, Connecticut Department of Transportation; excerpts reprinted in William B. Kennedy, "Taking Our Traffic Woes in Hand," Forum Op-Ed article, *Connecticut Sunday Post*, June 23, 2002, p. 2.

5. Information on Amtrak's role in Connecticut Transportation System was provided via e-mail by Harry P. Harris, August 10, 2004.

6. Harry P. Harris, e-mail.

7. Announcement of Listening Sessions for the State's Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRP), State of Connecticut Department of Transportation website, www.dot.state.ct.us, September, 2003.

8. "Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Transportation Strategy Board." Office of Legislative Research (OLR) Bill Analysis LCO 8020 emergency certification referencing Public Act 03-1, June 30, 2003, Connecticut General Assembly special session.

9. "New England Developments," Northeast Utilities System newsletter, p. 6.

10. Report of Connecticut, General Assembly Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee Study of Bradley International Airport Economic Development Potential, March 2000, at www.cga.state.ct.us/pri/archives/2001annualbradley.htm.

11. Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Transportation Strategy Board, pp. 5, 6.

12. "OLR Major Acts," Office of Legislative Research, Connecticut General Assembly, May 7, 2004 (Regular Session and May 2004 Special Session), pp. 22, 23.

13. State Department of Transportation Five Year Plan, Four Year Report, citing data issued by Analysis of the Market Facts Consumer Panel; reprinted in Kennedy, "Taking our Traffic Woes in Hand," *Connecticut Sunday Post*, June 23, 2002, p. 2.