

February 19, 2013  
74 Clarence Court  
Middletown, CT  
06457-4057

To: William Warner, AICP Dep't. Director  
City of Middletown, CT  
Dep't. of Planning, Conservation and Development

Re: Thoughts About Middletown's Future Development

### **Historical Background**

In 1877, the city of Middletown was served by no less than *three* railroads: Connecticut Valley Railroad (CVR), which ran north-south from Saybrook to Hartford; a branch line of the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad (NYNH&HRR), which also ran north-south, from New Haven to Hartford and beyond; and Boston & New York Air Line Railroad (B&NY Air Line RR), which ran diagonally across Connecticut, southwest to northeast, connecting New Haven with Middletown, Willimantic, and Boston.

A decade ago, Middletown was the home of the Connecticut Central Railroad (CCCL), which carried freight over the old rails of the Air Line from New Haven to Portland, with daily industrial switching from Middletown's South Cove area, via the rails of the former CVR, to the Mattabesset District water treatment facility in Cromwell and, via the old rails of the NYNH&H, to Primary Steel (off Newfield Street) and Middletown Builders Supply / Stone Depot (on North Main Street in Middletown), with manifests originating and terminating (for transshipment) in New Haven. Not too many years ago, so I've been told, freight trains ran over CVR rails from Middletown as far south as Maromas to deliver goods to Pratt & Whitney as well as coal or oil to the power plant just below CVH.

In recent years, CCCL having been sold to the Providence & Worcester Railroad (P&WRR), a thriving regional in New England states, we are still seeing weekly trains using the rails of the Air Line, the CVR, and the NYNH&HRR. The rails of the Air Line, though still in use, are in such poor condition that P&W freight trains are restricted to a maximum speed of 10 miles per hour. (One of the industries in Portland, formerly served by CCCL, had its building destroyed by severe winter weather, so the Middletown-to-Portland railroad swing bridge is rarely seen in use (by P&W) any more.)

Today, the rails of the CVR are still in place from Saybrook to Hartford and, except for the few miles rebuilt for use by the Essex Steam Train, they are unused and rusting away on their rotting ties while they await an intelligent and very farsighted and determined entity to repair and rebuild them, with a great potential for becoming a major tourist attraction to Middletown.

The influx of many new restaurants and other businesses to our vibrant and growing Middletown have made us a "Destination City" for thousands of tourists and 'settlers' in the past few years, but as the interstate highways and secondary roads of Connecticut and the United States become more and *more* congested with vehicular traffic, and their infrastructure requires more and *more* repair and reconstruction, and as Middletown itself becomes more and *more* traffic-congested, with people crying for *more* parking space for their cars downtown....

It seems to me that Middletown (and the state of Connecticut, which owns the railbed of the CVR) will be missing an opportunity of enormous potential if they fail to see the value of a long-term, total rebuilding of the CVR. [It is patentably obvious, of course, that Middletown cannot rebuild the CVR on its own, but we *could* be a powerful advocate, at the state level, for its reconstruction.]

Middletown can (a) ignore this opportunity altogether; (b) say it would 'cost too much' and dismiss it, as is being done with the current building of a (*diesel* bus) "busway" into Hartford from the west, *right over an existing railbed*, at great cost and with a limited future; or (c) Middletown can seize this truly great opportunity, as part of South Cove Redevelopment plans, to fight for and push for rebuilding the CVR.

I wonder: what would happen if, as part of South Cove Redevelopment, *Middletown were to go ahead and build a railroad station ? Might that prompt the State to seriously consider rebuilding the entire CVR line ?* (Note: any building constructed in the South Cove area would not have to *BE* a train station, it would only have to be built with its ground floor level designed to be eminently suitable to *BECOME* a train station.)

**Looking to the future: Go Big or Go Home**

In the event that a train station *is* built in the South Cove area, the planning for it should include (a) a restaurant with an outdoor dining area with a view of the river (perhaps on the second or third floor of the station building itself, not subject to seasonal flooding as is the Canoe Club); (b) a small urban park; (c) zip cars; (d) electric-car charging stations; (e) a landscaped bike-and-walk path to downtown; (f) possibly a small-boat launch ramp; and (g) a Chamber of Commerce kiosk to welcome travelers to our cosmopolitan little city. And (h) while we already have a riverside park where people can board sightseeing boats, if the city continues to grow (as seems inevitable), a second landing place for more sightseeing boats might be a good idea too.

With a train station built in the South Cove area, a second tour-boat landing could be included --as we now have in Haddam for tourists riding the Essex Steam Train-- perhaps even a dock for Water Taxis, like they have in Chicago.

### **The "Pitch"**

In city after city across America, light-rail systems are making a dramatic comeback, and residents who initially whined and complained about the expected costs and inconveniences of building light-rail systems, when, over the complaints and resistance, the systems were built, people began using them. Initially reluctant in some cases (San Diego being a prime example), once people began using the light-rail systems, they quickly accepted them and did not simply love them, *they couldn't get enough of them!*

Again using the example of San Diego, the outlying municipalities around the city demanded to be connected to the rail system as fast as possible. They quickly recognized the value of electrified train travel, just as hundreds and hundreds of New Englanders recognized the value of streetcars and 'trolleys' in and between their cities, as evidenced by the fact that, from the late 1800s to the mid 1930s, virtually every city and town of any decent size in Connecticut could be reached by rail. Call them trolleys, streetcars, or interurbans, what they all had in common was simplicity, comfort, and ease of travel, most powered by electricity. I read some years ago that, aside from the existing major railroads which were already there, you could buy a trolley ticket in Portland, Maine, and by transferring when necessary, you could ride a trolley from Maine to New York City. (Note: some of the trackbed of Connecticut's old trolley systems can still be seen in our shoreline communities, adjacent to U.S. Route 1.)

The primary cause of the demise of Connecticut's and other states' trolley lines was, of course, the automobile, and ever better, smoother and wider roads.

*But back then, nobody ever foresaw the traffic jams and the pollution problems of the 21st century.*

### **More Examples of Successful Modern City Rail Systems**

Another example is Washington, D.C.: in 1959, I detrained at Union Station and boarded a streetcar, part of a light-rail (trolley) system by which I was able to travel all over the entire city and out to the suburbs. One line ran from the train station all the way out to Glen Echo Amusement Park, near the old Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) canal. In the city, streetcars picked up their electric power via a 'plow' beneath the car that ran along a narrow slot in the street between the rails, similar to the street-slot used by San Francisco's cable cars; this eliminated the traditional maze of overhead wires ("catenary") for the trolleys. At the city limits, the plow was removed and the roof-mounted trolley pole was raised to contact the overhead wire, a simplified catenary that was strung not from its own expensive infrastructure but from the same utility poles that brought electricity to the homes and stores nearby.

*The citizens of the D.C. area loved the convenience of their streetcar system and used it heavily every day; sometimes travel was standing room only.*

But then some politicians got the idea that D.C.'s PCC (President's Conference Committee) streetcars were 'antiquated' and had to go. If they were so antiquated, why were so many of them successfully sold to Yugoslavia, where they continued to run for many more years? (Note: the trolleys from D.C. were still in good enough overall condition that they were reequipped with the wider trucks needed to run on Yugoslavia's wide-gauge rails.)

The disappearance of Washington D.C. streetcars, replaced by diesel buses, soon evoked a massive hue and cry; *'We hate the buses! Give us back our rail system!'*

And so, in a brilliant flash of vastly-overdue intelligent hindsight, Washington D.C. began building its Metro, with the same results as in San Diego: the citizenry loved it and called for more and more, and D.C.'s Metro system continues to expand even today.

Finally, the 'powers that be' came to understand the very real and lasting value of a narrow strip of rails, versus wider and wider and *ever wider* roads and massive acreage of parking lots or multi-story garages beautifying the landscape!

In the city of San Jose, California, a light-rail system was built in the last decade or two. In an example of (I believe) truly superior thinking and planning, the city gave the rails their own rights-of-way along the city streets, landscaped on one or both sides of the tracks with benches for waiting riders, and plantings of trees and shrubs, giving the entire inner-city rail system a park-like appearance, and fully ADA compliant. The railcars themselves, in addition to being very quiet and efficient and eco-friendly are, to me, some of the most beautiful (okay, pleasant to the eye) machines ever seen. And as my wife and I left the city in our rental car, we observed the same San Jose system extended out, *miles* out, from the city, with its right-of-way built in the median strip between the lanes of the Interstate. In contrast to the four- and six-lanes of the highway, *the railcars only needed the width of one or two lanes to carry more people than double the auto traffic*. Because the railcars were electric and the trains short (usually no more than three cars), they easily negotiated the undulating hills and broad curves of the highway while running as fast as the cars on the pavement on either side, with *each* railcar able to carry the same number of passengers as a dozen or more automobiles. Talk about fast, non-polluting, comfortable car-pooling!

The same approach has been applied to New Mexico's *RailRunner* system between Santa Fe and Albuquerque.

Southern California is home to the *Surfliner*, a passenger rail service from Los Angeles to San Diego using the ~~Union Pacific~~ RR's freight mainline tracks.

AT&SF (NOW BNSF)

### **Other Consequences of Not Considering Rails**

Something else to think about: the more we pave highways and parking lots with asphalt, several bad things happen: (a) we're continuing to use up more of the earth's finite oil reserves, (b) gobbling up more real estate and making it non-permiable, which damages the aquifer and which (c) leads to street flooding and more polluting runoff of dirt and chemicals into our streams and rivers. In contrast, the CVR and other railroads are specifically built to be permiable, allowing rainwater to drain between the crossties, directly back into the aquifer.

What I am advocating is: as a major part of any *serious* redevelopment plans for Middletown, pushing the State, pushing *hard*, for resurrection of CVR should not be overlooked or dismissed out-of-hand. Expensive? Yes, but *it will never be less expensive than right now*. (Again, no one would expect the city of Middletown alone to bear the cost of such a project, *but our city can be a powerful advocate for it!*) And the longer Middletown and the State of Connecticut wait, such a project will become *tremendously more expensive*. Would future value justify the initial outlay? You betcha! In spades!

Anyone paying attention to what is going on around the country should see the undeniable benefits of good, up-to-date rail systems. Rebuilding the Connecticut Valley Railroad would (a) create much-needed construction jobs in a stagnating economy, (b) provide additional and better transportation options for residents and tourists up and down the middle of the state, (c) result in less traffic congestion on our already traffic-taxed-to-the-limit and rapidly-deteriorating roads and highways, and (d) reduce the need for massive parking accommodations.

It is my belief that, in terms of reducing traffic congestion, the rebuilding of the CVR on its own *existing* narrow right-of-way (about the width of two lanes of highway but without widening anything, since the physical plant is already in place), could have a road-traffic-reducing potential equal to the addition of two more lanes to Rte. 9 (one more in each direction). And when Amtrak and the state complete the rebuilding of the second rail line from New Haven to Hartford (on the existing roadbed that *used* to have two tracks), it will have the same potential to reduce traffic on I-91 as adding four more lanes to that highway-- but again, the 'new' rail line *requires no widening*. Widening I-91 would require additional acquisition of real estate adjacent to the existing highway, either by purchase or by seizure by eminent domain.

**Oh, and by the way, we Connecticut Yankees all know what happens to existing road traffic while a multi-year highway-widening project is under way...**

I am not here specifically advocating streetcars for Middletown, but if a train-station-restaurant-tourist-center-mini-park facility *is* built in the South Cove area, I would be willing to bet people *may* begin to see the potential benefits of a trolley line terminal there, with a simple loop route through Middletown's major

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business zones... and don't be surprised if, as the city grows, more and more people will want an expanded light-rail or trolley line to accommodate the growing population, just as is happening in cities all across America.

In the case of the CVR, even though the physical plant is state-owned, I suspect that even the P&W might be interested in helping to rebuild the line; with appropriate passing sidings thoughtfully located along the line, some of which can be seen on old lithographs of CVR, the line *could* be used for freight, passenger service, and tourism. Saybrook-to-Hartford light-rail passenger service, directly connecting to Amtrak in Saybrook, would be electrified; the Essex Steam Train could continue to run, attracting thousands more tourists with a longer route and more available stops along the Connecticut River; and the few P&W diesel freights (if any) could operate under the wire. I have no doubt whatsoever that, were passenger and tourist trains reestablished on a CVR resurrected as far as Middletown, there would soon be a movement to finish rebuilding the entire line to Hartford.

I sincerely believe that Middletown is now faced with a truly huge opportunity to either (a) jump way out ahead of the national urban-growth rail service curve by spending money now, or (b) whine and grouse about money, money, money, and continue to do little or nothing to *seriously* help the economy of the city and the state to grow and prosper, and then struggle to play catch-up in years to come, at a vastly higher-dollar cost.

**To recap:** I wonder if, as part of South Cove Redevelopment, Middletown were to go ahead and build a railroad station, might that prompt the State to seriously consider rebuilding the entire CVR line ? (Again: any building constructed in the South Cove area would not have to *BE* a train station, it would only have to be built with its ground floor level designed to be eminently suitable to *BECOME* a train station.)

Respectfully submitted,

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