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Intermodal Connections Study Southeast

Final Report

Section 1: Project Background

February 2005

1. PROJECT BACKGROUND

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1. PROJECT BACKGROUND

1.1 STUDY ORIGINS

In November 2000, the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (SCCOG) identified the need for a regional intermodal transit system connecting ferries, buses, rail and New London's parking to the area's major tourist attractions and hotels. SCCOG believed that new transportation alternatives needed to be investigated because: 1) the regional economy has shifted to tourism, 2) the tourist economy is dependent on rubber-tired transport and 3) traffic congestion is a problem today that is expected to get worse before solutions can be put in place. Funding to study this issue was included in Section 16(a) of Public Act 01-5, the legislation which created the permanent Transportation Strategy Board (TSB). The development of such a system was included in the TSB's proposed transportation strategy report to the Governor and the legislature and is also contained in the plans of the Southeastern Corridor and I-395 Corridor Transportation Investment Areas (TIAs).

In June 2003, SCCOG initiated this study to prepare an operational and fiscal plan for a new transit system focused on tourist travel within the southeastern Connecticut region. A transit system utilizing buses was to be the focus of the intermodal transportation system. Funded by a \$500,000 grant from the TSB, administered by the Connecticut Department of Transportation, the goal of the study was to determine the viability of creating a system to better serve visitors, employees and residents within the region. The study examined service, facilities, and financial and marketing issues in the southeastern Connecticut region. A consultant team of experts in transit systems, market research, finance, tourism, public participation and transportation planning, headed by Multisystems – the New England-based public transportation consulting group now part of TranSystems Corporation – was engaged to conduct the study. Team subconsultants included Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Economics Research Associates, Fitzgerald & Halliday and Jakes Associates.

This section of the Intermodal Connections Study Southeast Final Report outlines the methodology used in conducting the study. In particular, it outlines the study process components, project schedule, project goals and objectives, and public and stakeholder involvement.

1.2 STUDY COMPONENTS

To conduct a study that would take a comprehensive look at transportation needs, resources and opportunities in the region leading to a recommendation for a tourist transit concept, the study team and SCCOG developed a workplan with the following components:

- **Clear objectives** – In close consultation with project stakeholders, the study team and Stakeholder Steering Committee established project objectives that focused on the

- critical characteristics of a proposed transit service for providing access to and circulation among the primary tourist destinations in the study area.
- **Evaluation of existing services** – A comprehensive review of the current transportation system serving the study area was conducted to determine the need for an improved intermodal transportation system serving the study area.
 - **Market analysis/ survey research** - Surveys of the visitors provided the basis for an analysis of the market that would potentially use the transit system proposed to link the tourist destinations in the study area.
 - **Alternatives development** – Alternative transit routes and services were identified and analyzed for their potential for serving the needs identified in the market analysis and evaluation of existing transportation services.
 - **Features and technologies** – Transit vehicle and station area amenities, information technologies and other features were identified to maximize the service quality, comfort and convenience of the proposed transit system.
 - **Management models** – Alternative models for system ownership and management were examined for the proposed system.
 - **Benefits and costs** – Operating and capital costs were estimated and a wide variety of benefits were quantified including induced visitation and associated revenue, as well as traffic level of service and associated air quality and energy impacts.
 - **Potential partnerships** – Opportunities for public-private partnerships were examined and discussed with project stakeholders to determine the feasibility of such a model for financing the proposed transit system, which was designed to improve access to the area's tourist venues.
 - **Stakeholder participation** – A collaborative planning model was adopted and implemented from the very beginning that engaged study stakeholders in the process. Features of the process included the formation and involvement of the Stakeholder Steering Committee, the establishment of a project website, numerous briefings and meetings with stakeholders, and public meetings.
 - **Business plan of service recommendations** – The culmination of the project was to document the results of the process: a business plan for operating a new transit system serving the region's tourist destinations.

1.3 STUDY SCHEDULE

The Intermodal Connections Study Southeast was initiated during the height of the tourist season in the summer of 2003. At that time, the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments began work with the consultant team to establish the project goals and objectives and set forth the major activities for the Intermodal Connections Study Southeast. The team moved quickly to conduct a visitor survey during the summer season that would supply important information for the study. In the fall, the team completed a review of existing transportation services, presented market analysis results and consulted with stakeholders. In the winter of 2004, the team developed preliminary service, technology and

management concepts and held a public meeting to gather additional input. In the spring, more specific service, facility and operational concepts were developed including initial cost estimates. In the summer, the team consulted with key stakeholders and developed funding scenarios. Late in 2004, the consulting team presented recommendations to the Stakeholder Steering Committee, the Council of Governments, the Transportation Strategy Board, and the public and submitted the draft Business Plan for SCCOG staff revisions. The original one-year schedule was extended for nine months to allow for more consultations with key stakeholders and the Transportation Strategy Board and to allow for more review of the Business Plan.

Table 1.3-1 shows the schedule of when the various activities were carried out.

1.4 PROJECT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

One of the first tasks of the consultant team and the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments was to develop goals for the Intermodal Connections Study, working with an inclusive and diverse group of stakeholders. At the beginning of the study a Stakeholders Steering Committee (SSC) was organized representing 25 different organizations in southeastern Connecticut. Goals adopted by this committee provided a framework for the study and guided the definition and evaluation of transportation alternatives for the study area.

Four general goals developed for the Southeastern Connecticut intermodal transportation system reflect both transportation and economic benefits:

1. Mitigate the local congestion impacts of the growing tourist industry,
2. Enhance the tourist experience,
3. Convey benefits to diverse local businesses, and
4. Expand the tourist market and employee pool to support economic well-being of the southeastern Connecticut region.

1.4.1 Transportation Goals

Specific transportation goals and objectives were also developed. These goals provided the specific framework for defining and evaluating the transportation alternatives. They were:

1. Provide a high-quality, convenient, and attractive, local transportation service that offers
 - seamless connections from existing or planned intercity services to casino resorts and area hotels
 - circulator service connecting venues
2. Improve tourist mobility

Table 1.3-1: Intermodal Connections Study Southeast Study Schedule:

Task	2003							2004												2005		
	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
1 Project Initiation / Objectives																						
2 Existing Service Review																						
3 Market Assessment																						
Conduct Market Research																						
Estimate Future Demand and Need																						
4 Service Concepts and Alternatives																						
Initial Concepts																						
Alternative Refinement																						
5 Public and Stakeholder Involvement																						
Stakeholder Interviews																						
Stakeholder Committee Meetings																						
Broader Public Input and Public Meetings																						
6 Costs and Financing																						
Preliminary Operating and Capital Costs																						
Cost Refinement																						
Funding/Public-Private Partnership																						
7 Benefits																						
Transportation Benefits																						
Economic Benefits to Tourism Industry																						
Benefits to the Broader Community																						
Air Quality and Fuel Consumption																						
8 Recommendations/Business Plan																						
9 Reporting																						
Presentation to Transportation Strategy Board																						
Presentation to Council of Governments																						
Draft Report																						
Final Report																						

3. Improve transit accessibility for employees of casino resorts, hotels, and other key major employers
4. Reduce traffic congestion

1.4.2 Objectives of Transit System

The consulting team and the Stakeholder Steering Committee defined clear performance objectives for the transit system. These objectives reflect the transportation preferences expressed by area stakeholders and the unique focus of the transit system, providing access to and connecting the region's premier tourist destinations.

- Connect intercity (ferry and rail) services in New London to casino resorts and area hotels (e.g., in Mystic and other areas)
- Connect venues and hotels enabling tourists to leave their automobiles at hotels
- Mitigate traffic congestion impacts of development
- Enhance the tourist experience and expand the tourist market
- Increase visitation at area attractions and encourage extended stays
- Serve needs of the convention market
- Improve transit accessibility for employees of casino resorts, hotels, and other key major employers and expand the employee pool

1.5 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Involving public stakeholders in the Intermodal Connections Study Southeast was viewed by the study team and Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments as a critical element of the planning process. This project had many stakeholders who needed to take an active role in helping SCCOG to identify the appropriate intermodal transportation improvements for the region. Representatives of the tourism industry and business community were easily identified and brought into the planning process. Yet the primary users of a transit system would be tourists who are transient and therefore difficult to draw into discussions about the development of a system. The study team therefore conducted a multi-level approach to obtaining input from stakeholders and the public.

1.5.1 Stakeholder Steering Committee

A Stakeholder Steering Committee (SSC) was established at the beginning of the study. Its purpose was to provide critical review and feedback at various stages of the study. The committee, which represented a diverse group of interests in Southeastern Connecticut, was viewed by the study team as critical to its effectiveness and the long-term viability of the project. Nearly 40 individuals attended a total of six Steering Committee Meetings over a period of 18 months.

Members of the SSC represented the following organizations: Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut, City of New London, City of Norwich, ConnDOT including Groton-New London Airport and the Office of Intermodal Planning and Policy and Planning, Connecticut East Tourism District aka Connecticut East Convention and Visitors Bureau (formerly Mystic and More!), Cross Sound Ferry, Foxwoods Casino and Resort, Livery Limited, Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, Mohegan Tribe, Mohegan Sun Casino, Mystic Aquarium and Institute for Exploration, Mystic Seaport: The Museum of America and the Sea, Mystic Chamber of Commerce, Mystic Coast and Country, National Passenger Rail Corporation (Amtrak), Southeast Area Transit (SEAT), Town of Groton, Town of Stonington, Town of Waterford, Waterford Hotel Group and Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (SCCOG).

At the initial meeting of the SSC committee, members learned about the study and their role in assisting the study team. At each SSC meeting, the study team made a presentation that was followed by questions and comments. As information was gathered and analyzed by the study team during the course of the study, it was presented to the SSC for its review and comment. Detailed presentations of the following topics were made to the SSC: study goals and objectives; market analysis of existing and potential tourism in the southeastern Connecticut region; strengths and weaknesses of the existing transportation system; examples of successful tourist transit systems in other regions; preliminary concepts for a transit system including design features and proposed routes; preliminary operating costs and a system of management and governance; impacts and benefits of the proposed system; potential financing of a tourist transit system and final recommendations for establishing the system.

Throughout the study common themes emerged within the SSC. There was a keen interest in looking at other tourist transit systems for lessons learned that could be applied to this region. There was interest in expanding the project to include a connection to airports beyond the study area; however, the scope of the study remained limited to Connecticut. There was interest in bringing tourists to the region by rail but recognition that service improvements and fare incentives would be needed and that this remained outside the scope of this study, particularly since Amtrak faced budget constraints and was not an active participant. There was debate on whether a new transit service could be designed to meet the needs of both tourists and non-tourists in the community, particularly residents of the area who are current or future employees of tourist attractions and other businesses. There was great interest in the assumptions used in the market analysis. There was agreement that marketing would be key to ensuring the success of the proposed transit services. One committee member voiced a sentiment that seemed to be shared by many, “we need to understand the region is more attractive if it’s tied together as a whole ...we need to leverage each others’ assets.”

The final meeting of the Stakeholders Steering Committee, prominently advertised in local newspapers, was attended by members of the public who generated many questions and discussion. Attendees said transit was needed as traffic congestion on I-95 worsened. They noted that the existing successful shuttle from the ferry to the casinos shows that people are receptive to alternative modes and inferred that they would also use trains to access the

region if frequent, reasonably-priced service was provided. Interest remained in broadening the geographic service area of the proposed pilot and complete transit system.

The study team recognized stakeholders may want to share ideas outside of a group forum. Therefore, the study team conducted one-on-one meetings with thirteen stakeholder organizations early in the study representing casino resorts, hotels, Mystic attractions, transportation providers (bus, airport and ferry operators) and the business community. The meetings provided an opportunity for representatives of all major stakeholder groups to meet one-on-one with the study team. The purpose of these meetings was to identify obstacles and opportunities associated with the potential tourist transit system and to make sure all key stakeholders' needs were reflected in the final tourist transit system concept. Appendix K of this report contains a summary of key issues identified by each major stakeholder interest.

1.5.2 Financial Working Group

Towards the end of the study, a sub-group of Stakeholder Steering Committee members met to review the business plan for the proposed tourist transit system and to discuss the elements of a start-up system under consideration by the study team. The idea for a start-up system has evolved into a proposed pilot demonstration system to demonstrate that a tourist transit system would generate the ridership and other benefits needed to make investment by stakeholders in a complete system worthwhile. One of the purposes of the Financial Working Group was to initiate collaboration among the key private sector stakeholders that would be necessary participants in an implementation of the proposed service. The Financial Working Group included representatives from the casinos, ConnDOT, Mystic attractions and tourism industry representatives – individuals who would need to continue to meet after the conclusion of the study to make the tourist transit system a reality.

1.5.3 Public Outreach and Engagement

The primary beneficiaries of the Intermodal Connections Study would be tourists and the tourism and recreation industry in southeastern Connecticut. As a result, public engagement in the process was a particular challenge. A variety of media was used to communicate with the different groups. Interaction with key stakeholders took place primarily through the Stakeholder Steering Committee or through interviews with stakeholders, as discussed above. Additionally, however, over 900 visitor surveys were conducted at a variety of venues to capture tourist public opinion. (Surveys were conducted at the two casino resorts, Mystic Seaport, Mystic Aquarium, two Mystic visitor information booths and at several area hotels. These surveys provided critical insight into the needs and preferences of those visiting the region. The surveys indicated a strong interest in a tourist transit system that provides convenient access and connectivity among different venues in the region. In addition, over 250 responses were obtained to an “e-survey” posted on the Mystic and More! Website. This allowed prospective visitors to provide opinions, as well. (See Section III, Visitor Market Analysis for a discussion of the surveys.)

An important vehicle for public information was the media. News stories and editorials appeared in the region's daily newspapers, the *Norwich Bulletin* and *The Day* (New London), as information was shared at stakeholder and public meetings. Press coverage extended to other part of the state, as far away as Waterbury. The Council of Governments printed stories on the study in two editions of its newsletter. Periodically, electronic news about the study was transmitted to about 300 people through two networks - the Eastern Connecticut Tourism District and Mystic Coast and Country.

A project website, www.seccog.org was also established for the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments. The website served as a window to the study, open to the public 24-hours a day. The site included a description of the study, reports of Stakeholder Steering Committee meetings, project documents, links and contact information and FAQs. An average of 12-20 people accessed the website daily during the course of the study.

All meetings of the Stakeholder Steering Committee were advertised and open to the public. In March 2004 a public meeting was held attracting sixty people. Many who attended were individuals associated with the area tourism industry - attractions, accommodations, local chambers of commerce and retail interests as well as local and state government officials. Attendees were enthusiastic about the potential of establishing a tourist transit system as they saw it as a clear benefit to their businesses and the region.

Near the conclusion of the study in November 2004, a public presentation was made to the state's Transportation Strategy Board. This meeting was open to the general public and its proceedings were widely publicized in the press, including coverage by CT-N television.