

# New Britain-Hartford busway gets FTA nod

By Sujata Srinivasan

The languishing New Britain-Hartford busway project has received a much-needed boost with the Federal Transit Administration (FTA)'s restoration of its "recommended" status, and a \$50 million allocation to the project by the state.

The busway project hit a major snag in February 2005, when the FTA downgraded the project to its "not recommended" list due to financial and engineering concerns. In the annual New Starts report for 2006, which includes evaluations of all major transit projects in the country, the busway received a medium rating, which restores its "recommended" status. The FTA in 1997 had selected the busway as one of 10 Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) demonstration projects nationwide.

"We've been working for a year to get the status restored," says Thomas J. Maziarz, director of transportation with the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT). "The DOT has almost reached the end of the preliminary design stage and is shooting for the final design stage by fall of this year."

ConnDOT is scheduled to present its preliminary design to the public on February 21 and March 1. Construction is scheduled to kick off by 2008.

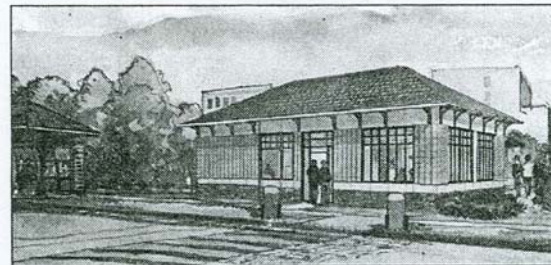
Maziarz points out that Gov. M. Jodi Rell's proposed \$50 million package for the busway as part of the state's budget initiatives for the year was instrumental in the restoration of the project's status. Rell allocated a total of \$344 million in transportation improvements over the next several years, which includes the development of a commuter rail service between New Haven, Hartford and Springfield. The administration in June 2005 allocated \$1.3 billion to transportation improvements in the state.

The 9.4-mile busway along the Hartford West corridor — defined as the area including Interstate 84, surrounding neighborhoods and the New Haven-Hartford rail lines — will service 12 stations in New Britain, Newington, West Hartford and Hartford.

The project was selected in 1997,

based on a 20-year traffic forecast in the region, from among other possible options — including commuter rail, light rail, high occupancy vehicle lanes and widening of the highways.

"The busway cost a half of the light rail option and one-fifth the price of widening the highways," says Mike Sanders, transit administrator at ConnDOT.



The proposed 9.4 mile busway, which is expected to be operational by 2011, will run between New Britain and Hartford along 12 stations. Around 4,500 new riders are expected to use the busway each day by year 2030. The early stage design is subject to changes.

The busway will be constructed on an existing and abandoned railroad between downtown New Britain and downtown Hartford. Scheduled to be operational by 2011, it is expected to service 18,000 weekday riders by the year 2030, at an annual operating cost of \$9.6 million.

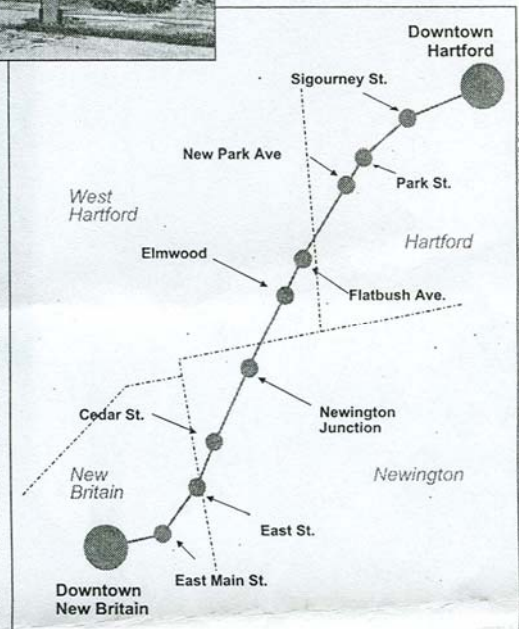
The federal New Starts share of the project is pegged at \$167.3 million.

"We're building the busway on two old tracks but will leave two additional tracks intact so that Amtrak or ConnDOT will be able to operate a two-track railway in the future," Sanders explains. Plans are on the drawing board to offer four types of services to commuters: express bus service (which will avoid congested areas and charge zone-based fare), shuttle bus service (from downtown New Britain and downtown Hartford with stops in between), neighborhood collectors and a feeder service which will reach spe-

cific destinations such as Hartford Hospital.

"You could get a one-seat ride straight to your workplace in downtown Hartford," Sanders says. The stations, which will be constructed along the busway, are expected to vary in size and amenities.

ConnDOT is proposing to purchase about 30 new buses consisting of 10 commuter coaches, 10 articulated buses (higher capacity) and 10 smaller buses. The procurement process is expected to commence in 2008, with an estimated delivery time of



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about 18 months. The commuter buses will cost around \$450,000 each, the articulated buses \$500,000, and the smaller buses \$250,000 each.

Sanders says ConnDOT is targeting the service to different market segments. For example, the express service will target downtown Hartford workers from the western suburbs.

"We're not trying to get everybody into the bus," he points out. "Our goal is to absorb some of the [population] growth in the future so that we don't have to expand the highway." ■