

# Transportation Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

**Bill No.:** HB-7059

**Title:** AN ACT CONCERNING CONNECTICUT RAIL.

**Vote Date:** 3/12/2025

**Vote Action:** Joint Favorable Substitute

**PH Date:** 2/26/2025

**File No.:**

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## **SPONSORS OF BILL:**

Transportation Committee

## **CO-SPONSORS:**

Rep. Travis Simms

## **REASONS FOR BILL:**

This bill requires the Connecticut Department of Transportation to study the feasibility of operating hybrid trains on the Metro-North Danbury branch line and expanding the line to include New Milford, as well as direct the Department of Transportation to include budget requests from the Connecticut Public Transportation Council and create a page on their website with information from the council. This bill aims to provide and potentially expand rail opportunity for those who utilize the Danbury line, reduce the environmental impacts of the rail system, and provide relief for the Connecticut Public Transportation Council, who recently expressed several challenges that have made it difficult that they had in advocating for consumer protection.

## **SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE:**

The substitute language includes the removal of provisions related to funding the New Haven Line, hotbox detectors, train crew size, and commercial freight rail bonding, and the addition of the provision related to the Council. The substitute language was added to deal with federal concerns regarding hot boxes and personnel requirements, remove the bonding portion as it needs to be part of the bonding bill, and to add the Transportation Council piece to help them create a web presence and cover small expenses. The Transportation Council section originated from an informational forum on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

## **RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:**

### **Garrett Eucalitto, Commissioner, Connecticut Department of Transportation**

Commissioner Eucalitto provided comments on the bill, describing several sections that were removed in the substitute language. The Department opposes Section 1, arguing that operational costs have increased since the pandemic, and while service has largely returned, the funding required is higher than before the pandemic. The Department supports the intent of Section 2 but has concerns about the state's authority to regulate train operations, which is typically a federal regulation. This section also conflicts with collective bargaining agreement with labor organizations that govern the number of employees on each train, and this regulation is similar to the exiting Federal Railroad Administration 2024 rule. The Department has several concerns about Section 3. They are concerned about the difficulty of installation and upkeep of hotbox monitors. The department points out that all CTDOT, Metro, and Amtrak have on-board detection equipment and that requiring further hot bearing wayside detectors would be duplicative and would be very costly to the DOT. In Section 5, the Commissioner points out that while DOT would like work with the committee on the best ways to modernize our rail system, any additional studies would require funds that are not included in the Governor's proposed FY 2026-2027 biennial budget.

## **NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:**

### **Representative Bill Buckbee, Connecticut General Assembly**

Representative Buckbee supports the bill, noting he has presented a similar bill on this. He argues that connecting the Stamford/Norwalk areas to New Milford by train provides jobs, housing, and creates a tourism opportunity as well as reduce traffic congestion. He advocates for this to be provided state-wide.

### **Joshua Caskey**

Mr. Caskey supports the bill, especially the provision for increased funding for the New Haven Line and studying the Danbury branch, believing that these initiatives will improve ridership and reduce emissions by giving travel options for the people of New Milford. They do want improved train conditions, as infrastructure that deteriorates over time causes delays and longer commutes. Advocates for electrified rail lines to enhance sustainability rider comfort and reduced transit times. Believes the bill could go farther to create an effective transit system in CT.

### **Kelly Grandfield, Legislative Representative, Local 1 of the Association of Commuter Rail Employees (ACRE)**

Ms. Grandfield supports the bill, notes personal struggles with the lack of proper service and the impact it has had on her ability to get to work, forcing her to take alternative transportation via ride-share services, cutting into her monthly budget. Supporting the CT Rail and the New Haven Rail Line would help to make it more sustainable.

**Ed Hawthorne, President, Connecticut AFL-CIO**

Mr. Hawthorne supports the bill, highlighting that rail companies are compromising safety by reducing crew sizes, increasing train lengths, and relying on automation to cut costs. Freight train staffing has decrease from five crew members to as few as one engineering and predicts that fully automated trains will appear in the future train derailments happen daily, causing significant delays and equipment damage. In the aftermath of the high-profile derailment in East Palestine, OH, Ohio passed legislation requiring at least two crew members on all freight trains in the state. Sec. 2 of the bill aims to prevent similar accident by requiring two-person crews for freight trains operating through the state. Sec. 3 mandates the installation of hotbox detectors on passenger rail lines, which monitor the temperature of train bearings to identify potential issues early, helping prevent costly and dangerous derailments.

**Katherine Jacobs**

Ms. Jacobs supports the bill, emphasizing personal reliance on rail, and notes that investments in CT rail is good for local businesses and makes the whole state a more attractive place to live. It also helps to reduce community's reliance on cars and no maintenance and service funding disregards the value of rail service.

**Nick Kantor, Director, DesegregateCT**

Mr. Kantor supports the bill, noting their ardent support for increasing access to and improving transit in CT, specifically the feasibility of operating hybrid trains on the Danbury branch line, expanding the Danbury line to include New Milford, and increasing the amount of bond funds for rail line improvements. He emphasizes the important of lowering carbon emission through expanded service and a 12% increase in ridership on the Hartford line and 11% on the Waterbury line when investment increased.

**Julianna Larue, Organizer, Sierra Club Connecticut**

Ms. Larue supports the bill, arguing that public transportation is key for reducing carbon emissions and combating climate change. It helps restore funding for the New Haven Line, increases bond funds for rail improvements, and explore the feasibility of hybrid trains and expanding the Danbury Branch. It aims to modernize rail systems, making them more competitive and environmentally friendly by reducing reliance on cars and trucks, thereby cutting traffic and vehicle emissions. Hybrid trains offer a clearer alternative to traditional diesel locomotives by reducing greenhouse gas emission, improve air quality and provide energy-efficient features like regenerative braking. These train support CT's climate goals by providing a transitional solution towards fully electrified rail systems, making train operations more sustainable and less reliant on diesel fuel. This approach benefits both the environment and public health, especially in high-traffic areas.

**Howard Pincus, President, Naugatuck Railroad Company and Chairman, Connecticut Railroad Association**

Mr. Pincus provided comments in support of certain sections of the bill. Regarding Sec. 2, he highlights that federal regulations already mandate two-person crews on train, making this section unnecessary. Regarding Sec. 3, he points out that major rail operations in CT, like Amtrak and Metro-North, already use this technology. He requests an exemption for heritage excursion railroads, which operator at low speeds and have had no hot bearing incidents in decades. He supports Sec. 4, praising the Rail Freight Infrastructure Program (RFIP) for rebuilding neglected tracks and bridges, creating jobs, reducing highway traffic, and enhancing CT's economic competitiveness.

**Parker Rodriguez, Director of Government Affairs, Housatonic Railroad Company, Inc.**

Mr. Rodriguez provided comments in support of certain section of the bill. Regarding Sec. 2 and 3, he notes that federal regulation having exclusive access and jurisdiction over railroad operations. State mandates could create inconsistent regulation negatively impacting interstate freight operations. The two-person rule of the Federal Railroad Administration and hotbox detector requirements are in place, making these requirements redundant. Implementing them could financially strain smaller, slower excursion railroads. He asks that these sections be removed. Regarding sections 4, he supports funding the Rail Freight Infrastructure Program (RFIP), which as improve rail infrastructure and provided economic benefits including construction jobs and reduced truck traffic, noting that it could be further strengthened to maintain and enhance the state's freight rail system. Regarding Sec. 5, he expresses willingness to work on a feasibility study for expanding passenger service to New Milford, noting the importance of the Berkshire Line connection.

**NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

No testimony in opposition to the bill was submitted.

**Reported by: Patrick Riley**

**Date: 3/13/2025**