

Transportation Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: SB-714

Title: AN ACT RESTORING SERVICE ON THE SHORE LINE EAST RAIL LINE.

Vote Date: 3/12/2025

Vote Action: Joint Favorable

PH Date: 2/26/2025

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Transportation Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

This bill requires the Connecticut Department of Transportation to restore service to the Shore Line East Rail Line to the same level as before the COVID-19-related reductions by July 1, 2025. This bill aims to provide relief to regular commuters who rely on the line to commute to work as well as expand the state's tourism and local businesses on the shoreline by expanding more flexible and reliable services, with the aim of improving ridership levels to the point they were before the pandemic and potentially look to expand the line into Rhode Island. These efforts promote the economy but also will aim to help reduce noise and air pollution from cars by promoting rail as a viable alternative to driving by car.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Garrett Eucalitto, Commissioner, Department of Transportation

Commissioner Eucalitto provided comments on the bill, noting that the funds required to restore service are not included in the Governor's proposed budget for FY 2026-2027 or the adopted budget for FY 2024-2025. There was recent service modification that should take into account the latest ridership trends and more data needs to be collected to evaluate the service, with future modifications being made based on demand. He notes that the CTDOT provided five alternative methods for restoring services on the Short Line East rail line along with funding recommendations for each.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Senator Martha Marx, Connecticut General Assembly

Senator Marx supports the bill, highlighting the fact that this line is the only one not to receive restored funding and service. She notes that several trains and round trips have been installed, leading to positive increases in ridership, but that this is not enough and that more needs to be done, the current gaps in service are unacceptable. These gaps include the distance between train times, low ridership, and services cut due to budget restrictions, limiting options for those that don't have another method of transportation available. The Shore Line East is a significant mode of travel from New Haven to New London. To restore faith in riders while boosting economic and environmental standards, the schedule needs to go back to 100% capacity with express trains, quiet cars, and the state-mandated expansion study.

Peggy Lyons, First Selectman, Town of Madison

First Selectman Lyons supports the bill, as it helps the local economy, resident, and environmental goals, and highlights the temporary funding increasing ridership but underscores the need for continued investment as the service is still insufficient. Madison does not have a secondary platform, which has an impact on schedules and traffic. A lack of quality service making commuting difficult for residents, especially during non-peak hours. The Shore Line East line is the only cost effective and time efficient option to connect to Metro North, helping to reduce highway congestion. She advocates for pre-pandemic level of service to be restored to support the local economy (including tourism to the state's largest beach, Hammonasset Beach state Park), help CT achieve its strategic investments around climate change, and housing development and notes the temporary funding led to 2 more round trip trains on the line, leading a greater than 50% increase in ridership on average per month.

Matt Hoey, First Selectman, Town of Guilford

First Selectman Hoey supports the bill, highlighting the effect that limited service has had on his community, specifically the ability to get to work in New Haven and beyond for entertainment and education in an affordable and sustainable way. He noted a 2018 survey that said Guilford's train station parking lot was 66% full, but by December 2024 it dropped to 21%. Ridership drops are unlikely to be restored without restored service to the line and points out that a housing development in Guildford, with 85 units is being built near the station as part of Connecticut's transit-oriented development goals, both of which are impacted with low ridership service, further impacting ridership and increasing congestion on the roads.

John Hall III, First Selectman, Town of Westbrook and William Neale, Vice Chair, Westbrook Planning Commission

First Selectman Hall III and Vice Chair Neale support the bill, noting restored service will enhance economic growth in the region, improve transportation and save people money, while helping transportation goals and retaining young people. Noted the previous lack of service and reduced demand during COVID, changing habits which has prevent the return of ridership. Adding trains has increased ridership by 50% in 2023. Restoring service fully will be more convenient for people who need to use the train.

Susan Feaster, Founder, Shore Line East Riders Advocacy Group

Ms. Feaster supports the bill, highlighting the struggle for funding on the line over the past few years during the pandemic due to low ridership, despite other lines being fully funded without having to prove ridership and the amount of transit-oriented development along the shoreline. Due to the \$5 million in ARPA funds, she notes a 32% increase in September 2024, 50% in October 2024, 74% in November 2024, and 53% in December 2024 versus 2023 in those respective months with the addition of two round trip trains all day. She further argues that the benefits the Shore Line East line provides to residents and visitors, especially for tourism on the shoreline and increased ridership. She advocates for this line to be further expanded to Westerly, RI, which would help benefit Electric Boat trainees and notes that fewer lives would be at risk on the road if people ditched road for rail.

Jim Gildea, Chairman, Connecticut Public Transportation Council

Mr. Gildea supports the bill, noting that the Shore Line East rail line is the only line not to be fully restored to pre-pandemic level service, which has led to decreased ridership and a low level of quality service. He notes the Waterbury branch, which recently got 7 trains which led to a 44% increase in ridership, followed by an increase in Hartford as well. He notes the significance of the \$5 million investment from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) which led to a 32% increase in September 2024, 50% in October 2024, 74% in November 2024, and 53% in December 2024 as compared to 2023 in those respective months, underscoring the need for more investment in the line to ensure increased ridership.

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

Ms. Grandfield supports the bill, noting serious concern about the lack of service on Shore Line East, which is currently at 29% and could decrease more. There is not connectivity to New Haven, and increasing service will incentivize riders to go on the train to New Haven and elsewhere, generating tax revenue. She wants this bill to be supported and sent to the Appropriations committee for further discussions as the budget comes together. A fully funded system will provide reliable and safe service, and this is a worthy investment to partake in.

Alexander Berardo, West Bay Coordinator, Rhode Island Association of Railroad Passengers

Mr. Berardo supports the bill, noting that an investment of \$5 million in ARPA funds had resulted in significant ridership growth, noting a 32% increase in September 2024 alone. The infrastructure at the Short Line East is improving, and additional stations and service extensions could boost ridership and efficiency. He advocates for increases service as it helps meet climate goals, incentivizes development, and ultimately reduces the per-rider subsidy by increasing ridership.

Rachel Briggs, Staff Attorney, Conservation Law Foundation

Ms. Briggs supports the bill, noting that while ridership has been increasing it has not yet reached pre-pandemic levels. Doing so would allow for more reliable commutes and help continue ridership growth. This could also help CT achieve its climate goals and reduce vehicle miles traveled. Not only does improving public transit reduce reliance on personal vehicles, but it offers health benefits as well, by reducing asthma rates caused by car emissions.

Douglas Brockway, Chair, Westerly RI EDC

Mr. Brockway supports the bill, highlighting Westerly, which he says has many residents that want to ride using rail. Notes the natural economy from Narragansett Bay through New London to New Haven, and the line helps the economy sustain and grow. Wants service restored and to work with Rhode Island to build out the Shoreline East extension dictated in ECRTS.

Frank Burns, Jr., Executive Director, Connecticut Tourism Coalition

Mr. Burns, Jr. supports the bill and wants service extended to Mystic to help bring people from the Metro New York areas all along the shoreline to showcase its arts, culture and tourism sector. This would allow the sector to have increased attendance numbers, additional employment opportunities and lead to additional tax revenue in the form of additional sales, meals, and occupancy taxes. Wants the CTDOT to provide funding to market and promote the line in the Metro New York Market, helping to boost ridership.

Maurice Clark, Director of Philanthropic Initiatives, Coast Guard Foundation

Mr. Clark supports the bill and is also in favor of expanding access to Mystic, CT and beyond, noting that the line is an incredible public good, and help tourism, which brings more vehicle traffic to southeastern CT, and will help reduce reliance on personal vehicles.

Joseph Comerford, Executive Director, Estuary Transit District

Mr. Comerford supports the bill, noting the significantly reduced ridership in the COVID-19 recovery. Even though the transit district provides local bus services along Route 1, bus service cannot fully replace rail, as trains are much faster and can go longer distances. The district has developed intermodal connections serving six Shoreline East stations to address the "first mile/last mile" barrier for rail riders. Restoring service is crucial for relieving congestion at the I-95/I-91 interchange and encouraging commuters to switch from single-occupancy vehicles.

Megan Cunningham, Senior Administrator of Faculty Support, Yale School of Management

Ms. Cunningham supports the bill, notes that the Shore Line East is not conducive to most of Yale's employees' lives, and believes that most employees and businesses in New Haven run on similar schedules. She advocates for more time options on the Shore Line East to adapt to New Haven employees.

Betsy Gara, Executive Director, Connecticut Council of Small Towns

Ms. Gara supports the bill and notes that restoring service provides a lot of benefit including more livable and walkable communities and increased tourism (generating tax revenue for local businesses and economies). Restoring service provides a more affordable and convenient, removing barriers to employment opportunities outside CT and along the shoreline in the state.

Amber Garrard, Director, Office of Sustainability, Yale University

Ms. Garrard supports the bill, noting that the Shore Line East provides an essential travel option for the Yale community (fostering regional connectivity), and reduces reliance on single-occupancy vehicles for commuters, and helps achieve their sustainability goal of having their community use sustainable transportation by 10% above 2015 levels by the end of 2025. They note an internal data showing reliability is important in travel and that Shoreline East usage has stagnated due to unreliable service, despite other lines showing increased ridership. This would reduce greenhouse gas emission and improve quality of life for those who rely on the train and would help Yale in its quest to expand and improve public transportation options.

Jodie Gillon, President and CEO, BioCT

Ms. Gillon supports the bill, noting that the bill, which intends to restore service on the Shore Line East rail line, will help support mass transit initiatives and reduce parking challenges by keeping people off the roads. It will also allow them to attract a trained workforce in New Haven, which is part of a broader mission to support development efforts for businesses there as well.

Samuel Gold, Executive Director, The Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments

Mr. Gold supports the bill, noting the significant decrease in ridership and service which inevitably led to the justification of permanent cuts. This line is the only line not to have fully restored services. He notes the \$5 million investment in ARPA funds, which showed significance ridership growth, a 32% increase in September 2024, 50% in October 2024, 74% in November 2024, and 53% in December 2024 as compared to 2023. Restoring services is important to reducing car dependence, promoting transit-oriented development, and addressing housing affordability while supporting those who can't afford a car. He believes this legislation will lead to economic growth, improved access to reliable transportation, and will support shoreline communities and their development.

Lisa Hagy, Member, SLE Riders Advocacy Group

Ms. Hagy supports the bill and cites her personal experience taking the train to her job in New Haven, and has enjoyed it because it supports the environment and beats the traffic on I-95. She makes note of the recent inflexibility of the Shore Line East, which incentivizes people to drive. It underscores the need for restored service that is more reliable and will lead to increased ridership, making it easier for those who don't have a car to take a convenient mode of transportation to their jobs, making the roads safer, connecting communities, and giving a better quality of life for communities around the state. She also advocates for an

effective media campaign to showcase the services the Shore Line East line has to offer, noting the increase in ridership due to the recent \$5 million investment.

Barry Kresch, President, Electric Vehicle Club of CT

Mr. Kresch supports the bill, noting that the Shore Line East line is the only line not to receive pre-pandemic service, and emphasizes the investment in funds last year that led to a increase in ridership. Warned that the under-investment could lead to continuing failure of the line.

Guy Milazzo, CT State Legislative Director LO-08, SMART-Transportation Division

Mr. Milazzo supports the bill, detailing the history of the Shore Line East rail line going back to May of 1990, and how its popularity and convenience stifled tremendous growth despite limited facilities and outdated train equipment. With the increase in stations built and the expansion of service came more demand, leading to State Street Station in New Haven being constructed along with a parking lot in 2002. With Amtrak track work and service reduction occurring during the pandemic, ridership dropped. To fix this, he argues we need to expand the current schedule, especially during peak hours, to help attract more passengers and allowing the service to succeed again.

Charles Rothenberger, Director of Government Relations, Save the Sound

Mr. Rothenberger supports the bill, noting that the Shore Line East line has struggled to regain its pre-pandemic level of ridership of 222 trains operating per week with annual ridership of 660,447. He advocates for a more convenient and flexible schedule to make this mode of travel more attractive than on I-95 and notes environmental and public health benefits such as fewer cars on the road, lower levels of tail-pipe pollution, less congestion, and fewer highway accidents.

Garrett Sheehan, President and CEO, Greater New Haven and Quinnipiac Chambers of Commerce

Mr. Sheehan supports the bill, highlighting that restored service helps with economic vitality and workforce mobility. It allows businesses to grow and expand access to job in and out of the states, and the current inconsistent service has seen limited economic development and investment. The line needed to be dependable, efficient and affordable for residents and businesses.

Eugenia Villagra, Co-Chair, Groton Conservation Advocates

Ms. Villagra supports the bill, advocating for restored service on the Shore Line East rail line to pre-pandemic levels because trains that carry many passenger makes them more efficient during peak hours. This reduces the need for cars, which can lead to reduced road congestion and reduced travel times on the road, while lowering emission levels and air pollution. Trains are also safer with lower accidents than traveling by car. She notes the positive impact of rail on transit-oriented development initiatives to ensure efficient land use to protect forests, and argues that riders incur less stress when commuting by rail, citing a

report from the American Heart Association that says those who drive have a higher risk of obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressures as opposed to rail commuters.

Nick Kantor, Director, DesegregateCT

Mr. Kantor supports the bill, emphasizing the negative impact that cutting service on the Shoreline East line has on the development goals on the shoreline communities as well as the efforts made to incentivize transit-oriented community. Increased development demand are evident with increased service, noting a 12% increase in ridership for the Hartford line and an 11% increase in ridership for the Waterbury line as a result of increased investment.

Several regular commuters of the Shore Line East line and residents along the shoreline submitted testimony in support of the bill, providing anecdotes of their personal struggles utilizing the current level of service on the line, noting inflexible schedules and inconvenience. They suggest that improved service will increase ridership and reduce traffic congestion on I-95, as well as help small businesses and the local economy.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

Peter Krawetzky

Mr. Krawetzky opposes the bill, highlighting concerns about increase parking at the Mystic train station, as increased traffic to the station could delay the Mystic swing bridge causing more delays for boaters.

Reported by: Patrick Riley

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