

Testimony Before U.S. Senate Committee on  
Commerce, Science, and Transportation

John Hartwell  
Connecticut Commuter Rail Council

Good morning. My name is John Hartwell, and I'm a member of the Connecticut Commuter Rail Council. Created by the state legislature, our mandate is to "advocate for customers of all commuter lines in the state and make recommendations for improvements," a task that this Council and its immediate predecessor have undertaken for more than a quarter century. Our members come from commuter rail lines both currently operating and planned -- the New Haven line, including its three branches, Shore Line East, and the future New Haven -- Springfield line, and we serve without pay, budget, or staff.

In the week following the resumption of full New Haven line service after the Con Ed problem, I went to the Greens Farms station near where I live with three members of the Connecticut state legislature to talk with commuters about their experience during the service interruption.

I used my background in market research to create and administer a survey, asking commuters what they did to cope with the disruption, how they felt about Metro North's response, what they knew about the possibility of refunds, and how they rated their overall rail commuting experience. Two days later I repeated this survey at the Westport station, gathering sixty-seven responses overall. Not enough for real statistical analysis, but certainly enough to get a sense of customer frustration.

Commuters used a variety of strategies to cope with the disruption. A few drove into the City or to an alternative station, had satellite offices they could go to, or worked from home. Most, however, made the best of whatever trains were available, often standing for more than an hour in packed cars to get to their destination.

To put this in perspective, I-95 is already jammed during morning and evening rush hours, Metro North customers have the highest fares and lowest mass transit subsidy in the nation, and parking at the stations is limited and expensive. If you've paid for a monthly ticket and are lucky enough to have a train station parking pass, you want to make use of them.

When asked about how Metro North responded to the crisis, the most common rating was a "3" on a five point scale, with the positives and negatives above and below evenly divided. Most who volunteered comments felt that Con Ed was to blame for the problem itself, but many said that communication from Metro North about alternatives was poor. They understood that they needed to make allowances for a difficult situation, but they also wanted much more timely, accurate information so they could make rational choices.

When asked what they knew about the possibility of refunds, most had heard the MTA was going to do something, but almost no one at that point had a clear idea how it was going to work or what it meant to them. And in terms of their overall satisfaction with Metro North, they were somewhat more positive (3.3 on that five point scale) but far from satisfied.

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New Haven line customers have experienced repeated service failures in the past few years, including Hurricane Sandy, Hurricane Irene, heavy snowfall in October, and ice storms in mid-winter. These were weather-related, but the derailment at Bridgeport last May clearly was caused by a deteriorating infrastructure that has left people worried and angry. And branch line customers are sometimes short-changed as their diesel engines are redeployed and they're left with unreliable bus service with drivers who have no idea where they're going, or with no service at all.

Under Governors Rell and Malloy the state has spent huge amounts on new cars, which is terrific, and ConnDOT has major renovation projects underway, but the fact remains that we are paying the price for years of deferred maintenance. Billions more are needed to upgrade or replace track, bridges, and catenary, install better signal systems and positive train control, and give us real-time communications.

Commuter rail is the lifeblood of Fairfield County, and it's not just the traditional commuters to Grand Central who are affected when the trains don't run. We have many commuters who never leave the state, traveling every day to work from Danbury to Stamford, or Waterbury to Bridgeport, or Guilford to New Haven. And there are thousands more who reverse commute, including some who come up from New York to work here.

The railroad is fundamental to Connecticut's economy and to the quality of life that attracts so many who choose to live and raise families here. You've already been told about how old the infrastructure is, and you're going to hear about the economic impact of these disruptions, both in Connecticut and along the whole eastern seaboard corridor. One hundred years ago this service was state-of-the-art. It should be again.

I'd like to make one more point before I close, about fairness. Two years ago, after another major service failure, the Council proposed a "Passenger Bill of Rights", which I've attached. It called in part for monthly and weekly ticket holders to receive a credit whenever Metro North couldn't provide either scheduled train service or a bus substitute. To us at that time the problem was straightforward – if you don't get what you paid for you should get your money back.

I'd like to applaud Governor Malloy's leadership during the current crisis in prompting the MTA to offer a credit to monthly and weekly ticket holders, and I hope that our representatives in Hartford can work together to make this a permanent policy. More than fifty thousand taxpayers who ride the trains every day deserve no less.

Thank you.