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## **CT's Longest Rail Branch Line Has Only 1,000 Riders a Day — and Abysmal Service: Cameron on Transportation**

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Remember Rodney Dangerfield, the comedian always complaining that he “gets no respect”? That’s how Waterbury line commuters (and local officials) feel. Their little branch line gets no respect.

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In fact, the Waterbury branch of Metro-North is the longest of three branch lines — 27 miles from the mainline (at Devon) to Waterbury. It carries about 1,000 passengers a day, the same as a single 10-car train

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The service on the branch is abysmal. Only two rush-hour trains in the morning and three at night. If you miss the 6:03 p.m. train from Bridgeport, you have to wait 2.5 hours for the next train. The locomotives are old and hard to maintain, breaking down often that riders must take buses.

And the on-time performance has been as low as an underwhelming 75% in recent months. The stations lack any amenities, are old, decrepit and hardly attractive. They've been that way for years, despite local mayors, developers and activists crying for improvement.

That's why I wanted to attend a recent "Rail Conference" in Naugatuck, bringing together everyone interested in improving the trains to face off with local state representatives and senators who can make it happen. It was a real eye-opener.

The venue was an old UniRoyal building on Rubber Avenue, a sad-looking structure next to a potholed parking lot. My GPS said I was in the right place, but there was no signage aside from the women's clothing sale going on in the first floor. Heading upstairs, I found the meeting room, complete with a bar.

Inside, the pols were gathering, the mayors on one side of the table and state elected officials on the other. Across the state these meetings happen before the Legislature comes into session, giving the lawmakers their marching orders.

Two years ago, the same meeting was held and the same cries were heard to "fix our trains," but little has happened.

Rail sidings are being built and a signal system installed, but until then, only one train can operate on the line, in either direction, at one time.

The mayors speechified that the Naugatuck Valley was ripe for development. In Ansonia alone there are 40 empty acres in downtown, never mind that much of the entire valley land is polluted from factories of the past, scaring off developers.

Still, people are flocking to the Valley for the affordable homes and good schools, but they can't get to work because train service is so poor. Why no progress on new cars and better service? The mayors blame the Legislature while other elected officials blame the governor.

With limited funding, the state DOT prioritizes the mainline, Shore Line East and the new Hartford Line for investment.

One veteran observed in the good old days, the Democrats and Republicans in Hartford would work together on common issues like transportation. But today, not even House Minority Leader Themis Klarides, representing Derby, can get her fellow lawmakers to achieve consensus.

"She seems more interested in fighting over tolls and taxes than delivering for her district," said one observer

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to me on the sidelines.

The potential for the Valley is huge, both for commuters and freight. But the legislators keep making excuses instead of making deals. Will things be any different this year? Stay tuned.

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