

Commentary



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Our Views



MIKE CHAIKEN, editions editor

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fax 860-621-1841

e-mail mchaiken@BristolObserver.com

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The wrong question has been asked

Thus far, we've been pretty much sitting on the sidelines regarding the hub-bub over the busway versus rail proposals

For those who may have missed the discussions, there is a proposal to build a nine-mile dedicated bus way from New Britain to Hartford, which would run alongside I-84 on a now unused rail right of way. There is also a proposal, supported by the Greater Bristol Chamber of Commerce to bring a rail line that would extend from Springfield to Hartford through Bristol, and eventually to New Haven—thereby bringing passengers to New York City.

The parochial huffing and puffing from parties in Bristol and New Britain grew louder when the federal government set aside grant money for the busway, thereby giving that project the fast track and, apparently, derailed the rail.

Since then, there has been a lot of kowtowing on the part of politicians seeking election or reelection saying they like the rail solution over the bus solution... at least when the politicians are sitting in Bristol.

Meanwhile, the citizenry of Bristol and New Britain is expected to take sides. Are you with us or against us? It's either the bus or the railroad.

The press coverage and the public commentary from both sides reminds me of a discussion a parent might have with a teenager.

"Grandma just gave me 150 bucks for my birthday. I'm trying to decide whether or not to get X sneakers or Y sneakers. X has better treads and I like the colors. But the design of Y is sleeker and my favorite ball player endorses them. They're both expensive, though. Which one do you think I should get, mom?"

In the teen's mind, the choice is either/ or?

But, what if the mother asked, instead, "Why should we get either sneaker. The ones you have now will keep you for now. How about if we set aside the money for a rainy day when you really need something?"

That's what we have to ask.

Why are we having the debate?

One of the arguments against the busway is that it's too expensive for what we get and for the amount of use we are going to get out of it.

Now, one of the arguments against the rail is there is an idea and a desire, but no plan. And no money to draw up a plan. Additionally, there have been no official studies done on what kind of ridership there will be if a rail line is extended through Bristol and beyond. The Bristol chamber has taken a survey indicating there is public interest in a rail line and people would use it. But the results, thus far, probably aren't enough to change the feds' minds.

As the plans now stand, unfortunately, even if we had the money, we can't do both because the busway would be built on a corridor of rail tracks needed if the Springfield to Hartford to New Haven line is going to work.

We've all experienced the problems with Connecticut's transportation system. If you've been caught on I-84 near Hartford or I-95 near Stamford at rush hour, you know things are a mess on our roads.

That said, if you've ever driven in other metro areas in this country (or the globe), Nutmeg state boondoggles are absolute cakewalks. It's not ideal, but it's functional. We're not in an emergency-mode to do something immediately.

So, the question is, why should the question at this time be rail vs. bus? The question probably should be, act now imprudently or wait till the circumstances are right?

Why not rethink the busway in a manner that makes more sense financially and find a route that doesn't preclude a rail-line. Just because the federal government is offering us money now for the busway, doesn't mean we have to use it. Why not turn it down and design a plan that takes advantage of bus and rail, which would be more economically feasible and would be truly resolve transportation woes in the entire region?

Why buy something we don't need or won't work just because we have the money in our hand now?

We recognize there is one difference in our analogy. In this case, "Grandma" Fed will take its birthday gift back if we don't "buy" something.

But we also aren't children. We know that if we miss this bus or train, history has shown us time and time again, another one is sure to come along if we just wait a little while.

Helping out still ailing New Orleans

Before the trip ended, we visited a bunch of places.

- The National World War II museum with its phenomenal movie theater.

- A few restaurants, mostly mom and pop establishments with names like Serios', Franky and Johnny's and the Trolley Stop.

- The Garden District via trolley and on a two-mile hike to dinner at Franky and Johnny's.

- The French Quarter but not Bourbon Street, even though the first day we got there was Mardi Gras.

- The Mississippi River, which we crossed on the ferry.

- St. Louis Cathedral, the oldest Catholic church in the United States.

- Cafe Du Monde, on several occasions, where we sipped coffee or hot cocoa and ate beignets—those square French donuts served warm with heaps of powdered sugar.

- Sonic, the fast food place that we see around here on television commercials, but do not get to dine out at.

That was all during February vacation, when 32 high school students from Rocky Hill High School (I teach there), five chaperones, and I headed to, you guessed it, New Orleans to work on what has become our annual Habitat for Humanity trip.

So, with all the stuff we did, it would be easy to conclude that everything is fine and dandy with New Orleans.

But you'd be wrong.

This is our third consecutive year in New Orleans, and we're just becoming familiar with the territory.

We've worked in St. Bernard Parish—or the infamous Ninth Ward—where most of the flooding from Katrina destroyed thousands of homes; we've worked specifically in Musician's Village, funded and



David Fortier
Around the House

sponsored by Harry Connick Jr. and Branford Marsalis; and this year, we worked on the West Bank where the flooding was not as bad, but, still, come on, it was bad enough.

Five years after Katrina, New Orleans is better.

Hey, New Orleans won the Super Bowl, right.

Our Habitat site leader told us that Katrina destroyed 180,000 homes. Habitat, he said, averages building 97 homes a year. Do the math. Based on those calculations, you can see that New Orleans still has a way to go before it can approach pre-Katrina numbers.

It's tough going, he conceded, because people get tired of hearing about Katrina, he called it empathy exhaustion, and ultimately there are new tragedies for people to move on to.

So we did our job, sheathing an entire home and painting the trim for two houses, but the most important thing we did was visit the home we built last year and talked with the new homeowners.

At 1825 Bartholomew Ave., we encountered three of them, one homeowner and two neighbors, of whom Louisa was spokesperson.

She was one of the people stranded on the bridge for four days waiting for some inking

of help.

Oh, she got help. She was put on a bus to Houston and told that she would have to find her own way home. Four-and-a-half years later, she finally returned.

"It's no wonder that they were found wandering around for days in a daze," she said. Some had never been out of the city. Some had never left there small community. This was all they knew.

Louisa's family had been in New Orleans since the late 1700s.

Her mother, who was in her 90s, lost the home that had been in the family for four generations.

"The people who lost their homes were the ones who lived pay check to pay check," she told us. They were the servers, the musicians, the regular people.

"We've got a long way to go," she said and she thanked us.

More than once, she thanked us as did Fred and Teddy.

In fact, everywhere we went, as people learned about our trip, people thanked us.

So we had a great time in New Orleans, but there's still a heck of a lot of work to do.

The students get it.

A few graduates have returned already with church groups and their college classmates.

Every effort, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, helps.

A few students are already talking about next year's trip.

Not only that, they are talking about forming a Habitat chapter at the school to work on our building skills right here in Central Connecticut.

David Fortier, a Bristol resident, is a freelance writer.

Letters

Cut the power for one hour March 27

To the editor:

Climate change is happening all around us and its pace is accelerating. From melting glaciers to increasingly intense weather patterns, climate change is already impacting life on Earth. Urgent action is needed now to save our planet for future generations.

In a bold statement of collective concern, millions of people around the world will turn off their lights for one

hour— Earth Hour— on March 27 at 8:30 p.m. local time. I urge everyone to take part and support this effort by committing to turn off all non-essential lighting.

Sponsored by World Wildlife Fund, Earth Hour is the largest event of its kind in the world. In 2009, nearly one billion people from 4,100 cities in 87 countries turned out their lights, as well as international landmarks including the

Golden Gate Bridge, Empire State Building, Eiffel Tower and Great Pyramids, and the city skylines of Las Vegas, Hong Kong and Tel Aviv.

We have the power to make Earth Hour 2010 even bigger.

This is a critical moment for our planet. On March 27 at 8:30 p.m., let's all turn out and take action

Christopher MacNeill
Bristol