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Area Shuttle Study Gets Green Light

By: Hank Russell

Five Town Rural Transit, Inc. recently announced that a \$400,000 feasibility study will be conducted on the proposed coordinated rail and bus network for the East End.

As previously reported, 5TRT, a Sag Harbor-based non-profit organization, recommended an east-west rail shuttle system in which commuters would be met at the stop by shuttle buses that would run north-south every half hour. The North Fork line would start where existing Long Island Rail Road service ends at Medford, while, on the South Fork, it would start where existing LIRR service would end at Speonk. Buses would then transport commuters either to another train station or a bus stop that would act as a transfer station.

Late last month, the East End Supervisors and Mayors Association reached an agreement with the Volpe National Transportation Systems Center to have the agency perform a \$400,000 feasibility study on the proposed rail-bus network. "It took a couple of months to work out the details, but the basic concept was pretty much agreed upon," said Tom Neely, the town of Southampton's director of public transportation and public safety, who will act as the project manager under the agreement.

Ninety percent of the funding for the study came from the New York State Department of State's Shared Municipal Services Initiative, and 10% came from the five East End towns. The town of Southampton agreed to apply for the SMSI grant. "We were happy we signed off as the lead applicant on behalf of the five East End towns," said Southampton Town Supervisor Patrick Heaney. "We were happy to have [the East End Supervisors and Mayors Association] on board."

The Volpe Center, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is a fee-for-service organization that is part of the US Department of Transportation's Research and Innovative Technology Administration, according to the US DOT. "This [study] will be a hard-core examination of the concept called the East End Shuttle, as well as other alternatives" said Hank de Cillia, 5TRT's executive director. "In order for the concept to be successful, it has to be verified by an acknowledged transportation authority. That's why we are working with Volpe."

"This is another step forward toward a better transportation solution," said NYS Assemblyman Fred Thiele (R-Bridgehampton), who helped secure the SMSI grant. Some of the recommendations came from the 2005 Sustainable East End Development Strategies study, which outlined the public transportation needs for East End residents while reconciling land use and environmental issues. Volpe would also look at alternative concepts to determine which would be "the most appropriate" based on "the economic scale" of the project, Neely explained.

The LIRR will be involved with the study to provide "technical assistance," according to LIRR Chief Planning Officer Elisa Picca. "We will follow the progress of the study," she said. As part of the technical advisory committee, Picca said, the LIRR would provide information such as proposed designated stops, ridership and "a complement of services" for East End commuters, she said. Responding to criticisms that the LIRR does not provide enough services to East End residents, Picca said the LIRR is "working very diligently" to address these concerns. She cited the LIRR's additional train service to the Hamptons during the summer, and the extra trains during the Professional Golfers' Association of America's US Open at Shinnecock Hills Golf Course.

LIRR President Helena Williams "expressed interest" in the proposed East End shuttle program, according to de Cillia. "Our relationship [with the LIRR] has improved significantly over the past few weeks," he said. Thiele credited Williams with being "more than willing" to assist Southampton area commuters with the LIRR's South Fork Commuter Connection while roadwork is being done on County Road 39. "I was thrilled with the level of attention she provided with the railroad [service]," Thiele said.

Although the South Fork Commuter Connection is a short-term program - according to the town of Southampton, it will operate until May 22, 2008 - the proposed East End shuttle would provide a long-term solution. "Participation [in the rail-bus system] is critical," Thiele said.

The South Fork Commuter Connection will not be extended, according to Picca, since construction on CR 39 would be completed by that time, and LIRR service during the summer season - adding more train service out east - would begin the following day. Heaney noted that 175 people used the South Fork Commuter Connection on its first day. Since then, ridership has increased to 300 riders a day. "People are getting a kick out of it," he said.

After the study is released, 5TRT and Volpe will hold discussions with local residents and elected officials on the findings, according to Neely. A voter referendum on the proposed coordinated rail-bus system is scheduled to take place in November 2008. But before a referendum can be completed, a State Environmental Quality Review Act analysis must be performed, Neely said. "SEQRA is not part of the current work plan, but it needs to be done," he noted. In the meantime, de Cillia and Williams plan to meet "once the study gets underway," Picca said.

This has been approximately 15 years in the making, according to Heaney, with East End residents calling for "a blueprint" of a dedicated public transportation system. "We'll see what the results reveal 10 months from now," he said.