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Courtney event gathers supporters of New London to Mass. railroad

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New London — An upgraded railroad from New London to the Massachusetts border would provide immediate construction jobs and would improve the region's industrial economy for decades to come, supporters of a federal grant application for the project said Monday.

About 50 political and business leaders gathered at Union Station for a panel discussion to support the state's application for an \$8.3 million federal grant to upgrade the New England Central Railroad line.

U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, organized the event to bolster the many letters of support that accompanied the state's April application for Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery grant funding. Courtney is scheduled to meet with U.S. Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx on July 9 to discuss the project. The highly competitive grants are expected to be announced in late July or early August.

Genesee & Wyoming, which owns the New England Central Line, has committed \$2 million to the project, which would replace 19 miles of older rail that was not designed for today's heavy loads, and would upgrade the route with the installation of more than 15,000 new ties and 15,000 tons of ballast.

In addition, the state has provided a \$3.6 million Fix Freight First grant to the New England Central Rail corridor.

Along with Courtney, U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., Lt. Gov. Nancy Wyman, municipal leaders and business representatives from New London and Windham counties spoke at Monday's forum. The line runs from New London through Montville, Norwich, Franklin, Lebanon, Windham, Mansfield and Willington to the Massachusetts line.

Andrew Clark, chief coordinating officer of Can-Am Trading & Logistics LLC, gave enthusiastic support to the project. Clark said his Essex company was relying on truck transportation to send logs as far away as New York, Maine and Canada when he discovered a rail yard in Franklin along the Central Rail about a year ago.

The company has shipped 47 rail cars loaded with logs in the past year using the rail yard on Route 87 in Franklin. Upgrading the tracks would allow for larger loads, cutting costs and improving efficiencies, he said, adding that 42 loaded rail cars handle the equivalent of 200 truckloads.

"I put so many hours into this," he said of his study of rail transport. "I'm beginning to love the railroad."

Norwich Mayor Deberey Hinchey said one of the city's largest taxpayers, US Foods, is located on the rail line, but brings in dozens of trucks to ship its products from its large distribution center on Otrobando Avenue.

Norwich City Manager Alan Bergren, who also has sent letters of support for the project, said freight would not be the only benefit. Bergren said the Norwich Transportation Center at Norwich Harbor is located near the track, and Bergren said adding future passenger service to the line would help revitalize the city's downtown.

Todd O'Donnell, co-owner of Union Station in New London, told the audience that passenger use of the station has nearly doubled in the past 11 years. In 2002, the station saw 110,000 passengers come through the doors. By last year, that number had jumped to 205,000, O'Donnell said. With the plans for the U.S. Coast Guard Museum and the proposed upgrade to the New England Central line, he anticipates passenger counts could go up substantially.

Courtney described how he watched a freight train "moving very, very slowly" over the obsolete tracks while he was stopped at a railroad crossing off Route 32 in Windham. He said he could see the jointed tracks shifting with the weight.

Courtney said the state's support should boost the application. While the state's \$8.3 million grant application seems small when compared with the \$600 million total available in TIGER grants, the process remains highly competitive.

“There’s \$600 million total available, but the ask is in the billions,” Courtney said.

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