

Study aims to improve bus service in region

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By [Kimberly Drelich](#)

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A new study hopes to engage residents, town officials and representatives of local organizations in taking a comprehensive look at improving the region's bus service.

The study of the Southeast Area Transit District, overseen by the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments with SEAT and the state, will analyze the transit district's bus routes, ridership, rate structure and facilities.

SEAT operates about 20 distinct routes in the region, with more than a million boardings each year, according to SEAT General Manager Michael Carroll. East Lyme, Griswold, Groton, Ledyard, Montville, New London, Norwich, Stonington and Waterford are SEAT member towns.

Carroll said the study will help the bus district understand "how we are performing and what we can do to adjust the service to meet the needs of our diverse community."

Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments Executive Director James Butler said study organizers are soliciting feedback not only from existing customers, but non-riders that could use the service if it became available at a time or location that met their needs.

"We're trying to reach out to everybody," said Butler.

Public meetings on the study are slated for early 2015 and online surveys are currently available on the study's website, <http://seatbusstudy.com>.

Consultants also plan to survey riders in the transportation hubs of Norwich and New London, said Butler.

The study's consultants, Nelson-Nygaard Consulting Associates, are meeting "stakeholders" in the region that include Three Rivers Community College, the Naval Submarine Base, General Dynamics-Electric Boat, SEAT's drivers' union, the Southeastern Connecticut Housing Alliance, the Eastern Regional Tourism District, the Mashantucket-Pequot Tribal Nation, the Mohegan Tribe, and local hospitals and chambers of commerce, according to the website.

The consulting firm has also surveyed the number of boardings on SEAT's bus routes.

Officials from municipalities represented by the regional council and the region's human service providers will also participate in the study, overseen by the council's staff.

Butler said many people rely on public transportation who don't have access to a vehicle, either because they can't afford to or can't drive. Public transportation can also result in energy and money savings for residents and lead to less pollution.

He said improved bus service would help the region's economy, by assisting people in getting to work, going shopping or reaching medical appointments.

Founded in 1975, many of SEAT's service routes are historically based and haven't changed too much over the years, but land-use patterns and where people work and shop have, Butler explained. For example, residents used to often go shopping in cities, while many now travel to suburban malls.

"Are we putting buses on the road in the best places at the right time and at the right frequencies?" he said.

The study is slated for completion this summer. Service recommendations from the study will then require discussions with SEAT's funding sources, including the state and local towns and cities, as well as a consideration of factors, such as fee structure, said Carroll. The study's organizers could also retain Nelson-Nygaard to assist in implementing the recommendations.

The state Department of Transportation had initially discussed conducting a review of SEAT's services when it agreed in February, 2013 to take over management of the bus district and pay for the clean-up costs resulting from an earlier oil spill near the district's Route 12 facility in Preston.

The Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments applied for money in the fall of 2013 to fund a \$250,000 service study, mainly through federal Surface Transportation Program funds. Those funds are covering \$200,000, while the state and the council are funding the remaining \$50,000.

The Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments, which secured the grant and hired the consultant for the study, has taken a more active role in SEAT, said Butler. SEAT's Board of Directors meetings will also now be held following the council's regular monthly meetings, typically held at the council's headquarters in Norwich.

k.drelich@theday.com

Twitter: [@KimberlyDrelich](https://twitter.com/KimberlyDrelich)