



Why Improve Public Transit on the East End of Long Island?

A White Paper Prepared By:
Five Town Rural Transit, Inc.
(www.eastendshuttle.org)

For more information, contact:

Hank de Cillia, Executive Director & Spokesperson
Five Town Rural Transit, Inc., P.O. Box 1433, Sag Harbor, NY 11963
T: 631 725 2745
E: decillia@earthlink.net

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Be it the Montauk Highway on the South Fork, the Sunrise Highway/County Road 39 merge in Southampton, County Road 58 in Riverhead, or Sound Avenue on the North Fork, it is apparent that the East End's local roads often cannot accommodate the traffic they must bear. In an era when funding is limited with regard to fixing existing problems it seems highly unlikely major new roads will be built, not that residents would ever want them anyway. It is also apparent that what little public transportation we have on the East End is uncoordinated and wholly insufficient.

Most East Enders we speak with are opposed to, or at the very least concerned about, our rapid population growth. In spite of these feelings, the South Fork population, for example, grew by 20% in the 1980s, another 20% in the 1990s, and is on pace to grow by 25% this decade. In addition to this resident growth, about 40% of all homes on the entire East End are now second homes. Most are owned by people who live in the New York City area and travel regularly to them. They are not residents yet, but many are approaching retirement and planning to move here full-time soon. As a result, our population could almost double even if we never build another house! Add to the mix an increasing percentage of visitors who no longer come here just during the summer. Many are here on weekends year round too. Our total population triples on most weekends and quintuples in the summer. Finally, we have a growing army of workers who either live on the East End or commute from the west because they can't afford to live here----to build and refurbish houses, landscape properties, construct and maintain pools, work in schools, hospitals, stores, restaurants, local offices, etc.

When we ask people to rank what they dislike most about our growth, traffic and parking problems are at the top of almost everyone's list. Ironically, it's not the volume of people that is perceived as the problem (unless you're trying to get a table at an East End restaurant in August!), it's their vehicles clogging the roads and taking the precious parking spaces in our Villages and hamlet centers.

Building more roads and larger parking lots won't solve these problems either. That will only induce more demand, as far as we're concerned, because there are so many people who live in the New York City area and who see the East End as a highly desirable place in which to live, own a second home or spend a vacation. If you substantially increase the capacity of our local roads to accommodate more vehicles, the word will soon get out and even more people will come by car.

The only realistic and practical solution to the growing traffic and parking problems on the East End is to provide people with an alternative to always using their cars. According to some recent local traffic studies, if we can design a transit system that gets just one in ten people to make regular use of it, we can virtually eliminate the traffic and

parking problems we now have and do our fragile environment a big favor at the same time. Only 2% of our residents report they regularly use transit----in large part because current services are so limited. If regular usage went from 2% to just 10% with improved transit services, we might very well solve our traffic and parking problems.

Unfortunately, we have very limited public transit options on the East End right now. The Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) trains run once every three hours on the South Fork and once every eight hours on the North Fork on average. The Suffolk County Transit (SCT) buses also run infrequently----once an hour on limited routes with no evening or Sunday service. Further, the trains and buses are not coordinated in any meaningful way to enable people to make transfers in order to get where they need to go.

How might a better transit system work on the East End? Here are a few examples from the **East End Shuttle™ Development Proposal**, prepared by **Five Town Rural Transit (STRT), Inc.**, a public transit advocacy group founded in 2004 with a citizen Board of Directors representing each East End Town:

- The heart of this new transit system would be greatly increased rail service, running as often as every 30 minutes in both directions on the existing LIRR tracks. Some track improvements would be needed, like passing sidings at key points because we only have single track lines, and an automated signal system to manage the more frequent service. Also, we would purchase a different type of rail vehicle----smaller scale, less noisy and more fuel efficient----to provide the expanded service. This rail shuttle service would, in effect, be the "spine" of our new transit system, capable of running on time east and west regardless of the traffic jams on the nearby roads.
- The existing LIRR service (except for some high volume runs on the South Fork during summer weekends) would terminate in Speonk for the South Fork passenger and probably Medford for the North Fork rider. At that point, a seamless transfer would be made from the LIRR train to an East End Shuttle train, or vice versa if heading west. The new Shuttle trains would not just serve the New York City traveler as they have in the past; they would also provide intra-hamlet or Village service on the East End for the very first time.
- Another critical element of the East End Shuttle proposal to complete the network concept is connecting shuttle buses that would meet trains at every station as often as every 30 minutes to take riders to a final destination that may not be near a rail station. For example, riders going to Sag Harbor from the west would take the rail shuttle to the Bridgehampton station and transfer to a waiting bus shuttle to get to Sag Harbor Village. Or, riders on the North Fork going to the Cross Sound Ferry from the west would take the rail shuttle to Greenport and transfer to a waiting bus shuttle heading to Orient Point. Every rail shuttle station on both Forks would have waiting bus shuttles. While they would follow fixed routes and be able to pick up and discharge passengers anywhere

along the way, they would also be able to go off the fixed route at times and pick up riders "on demand" for a higher fare.

The basic East End Shuttle idea is that simple. Make far better use of the existing train tracks to provide on-time travel east and west instead of using our overburdened roads, and provide connecting buses that mainly run north and south routes from the train stations, on local roads that don't have as much traffic.

Who might use this East End Shuttle? We think people from every potential rider group could make use of the service for at least some of their travel needs. For example:

- **Residents** could substitute The Shuttle for some of their local auto travel----to go from one place to another for shopping, to visit friends, to go to a restaurant, to enjoy a train ride on a nice day, etc. Of course, some of our residents are transit dependent and must use transit----either they don't own a car or can't drive because of age (young or old) or physical condition. This group will be the most frequent rider, but the network will be designed for all of our residents.

- **Second Homeowners**, most of them living in New York City, Nassau County and even western Suffolk County, could leave one (or more) of their cars at their second home or the nearest rail station and use the East End Shuttle in combination with the LIRR for most of their long distance travel needs. They could then make use of The Shuttle as residents would do when they are living here part-time on weekends or during the summer.

- **Workers**, almost half of whom come here every workday from western Suffolk and Nassau Counties, could take the East End Shuttle to avoid the daily traffic jams, especially on County Roads 39 and 58, in order to get to work. Many of our workers have jobs in local schools, hospitals, stores, restaurants and offices; they don't all drive a truck but they're all stuck in the "trade parade" traffic every day. Speaking of trucks, we have even met with tradespeople who would be willing to drive their truck out here at the beginning of a workweek and leave it in a secured parking area at night, using transit for the rest of the time in order to avoid the now unbearable traffic.

- **Visitors and Tourists**, mostly from the New York City area, could use the East End Shuttle as some currently use private bus services like the Hampton Jitney or, occasionally, the LIRR. Whether they are coming for a long stay as renters or are just here for the day, the Shuttle could also work effectively for them.

As mentioned earlier, we don't believe more than 10% of the people from each of the above rider groups would need to use East End Shuttle on a regular basis for it to be successful and beneficial to all, even for those who don't use it! But of course, we would like to design a system that would be attractive to an even larger percentage of riders.

What are the chances that East End Shuttle can actually happen? We're not betting people, but we now give ourselves an even chance of establishing such a service. The good news is that two years ago, we thought our chances were far less! Having presented our concept to the LIRR Management recently, we would say it is obvious they see their primary business as New York City commuting and will continue to do so. We simply don't fit that model. However, there is a distinct possibility the East End could create its own Regional Transit Authority (RTA) and operate independently of the New York City-based Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) that runs the LIRR. There is even precedent for this to happen. In a neighboring state, Massachusetts, the Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority was created in the early 1970s and operates independently of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) in Boston, as do many other regions in that state.

How can we afford to develop and operate such a system? According to 5TRT estimates, about \$150 million would be required on a one-time basis in order to make the capital improvements needed for East End Shuttle operation, including purchase of new trains and buses. Improvements like these are handled mainly through Federal Transit Administration grants from their New Starts or Small Starts programs and we have good reason to believe we could qualify as a region. On the operations side, you may be shocked to discover the East End already pays over \$60 million per year to the MTA in various legislated tax assessments for the very limited service we receive. 5TRT has estimated we would need about \$40 million per year to operate a first class East End Shuttle service. So, sufficient transit dollars are already being paid by East Enders. We're just not receiving the appropriate services.

Where do we go from here? In the near future, the \$400,000 East End Shuttle Feasibility Study will begin, with funding from New York State and financial participation by our five East End Towns. The Town of Southampton has agreed to be the lead applicant on the project, and will hire a nationally recognized, third party transit consulting organization to do most of the research and analytical work. 5TRT, as project originators, will participate in setting the project direction and communicating with the public. The main goals are to confirm the East End Shuttle concept (or an alternative approach), and then determine if we can or should establish our own Regional Transit Authority to operate it. We expect to complete the Study by the end of next summer, in time for a voter referendum on the concepts in November 2008. Based on the results of our own East End Transit Survey, conducted in 2005 by an independent, third party polling organization, we have good reason to believe voter support for the East End Shuttle concept will exceed 70%. If you would like to see this Survey or our Development Proposal, visit our website at: www.eastendshuttle.org.

In summary, rapid population and commercial growth continues on the East End with no end in sight. East Enders don't want more major roads, but the ones we have are getting clogged with traffic. Doing nothing about the problem is not acceptable anymore. We need to counterbalance our population growth by developing alternatives to driving cars all the time. The **East End Shuttle™** might just be the answer. Although we could virtually solve our traffic and parking problems if only a small percentage of the potential riders would make regular use of better transit, our East End Transit Survey showed that 22% of the public said they would make regular use of the system we described. That's not a guaranteed forecast of usage, but it's certainly a very strong indication that East Enders would consider using public transportation in their daily lives, if only we had a better system.

It's time for East Enders to get what we want and need. We're already paying for it.

The Officers and Board of Five Town Rural Transit, Inc.:

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Vince Taldone, Board Member (Riverhead Town)

For more information, contact:

Hank de Cillia, Executive Director & Spokesperson

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