

# CENTRAL CONNECTICUT RAIL STUDY

## TASK 7: FOCUS GROUPS SUMMARY REPORT



**CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION**  
**STATE PROJECT NUMBER: 171-366**

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

As part of the Central Connecticut Rail Study (CCRS), the Study Team conducted two focus group meetings to provide an opportunity for concentrated input from distinct stakeholder groups. The objective of the focus group sessions was to offer stakeholders the chance to represent their interests without fear of negative reactions from other groups. Input from all users can then be balanced and consistent input identified.

The focus group meetings were held on Wednesday, April 3, 2013, at the offices of the Central Connecticut Chambers of Commerce (200 Main Street, Bristol, CT). The first focus group (11AM to 1PM) was primarily dedicated to employers and employees. The second focus group was primarily dedicated to residents and was held from 5:30PM to 7:30PM. Participants were identified by the Study Team because they participated in the Study's online survey, contacted the Study Team via the website, were recommended by a member of the Study Advisory Committee, and/or attended the first Study Advisory Committee meeting as an interested party. Representatives of major employers throughout the Study Corridor were invited to participate as well. Participants were invited via email and Outlook meeting notices.

Both sessions were facilitated by David Fields (Nelson\Nygaard) and Stephen Gazillo (URS Corporation). At each session, participants had access to existing bus and train schedules. A large regional map was also available for participants to use to identify important locations within the Study Area.

A Question Template was designed in advance of the meeting to help lead the sessions (see *Appendix: Focus Group Question Templates*). Four sets of similar questions were identified, though the sessions were adapted based on who attended and by the most important topics as voiced by participants.



## Chapter 2. Focus Group #1: Employers and Employees

The first focus group included nine attendees.<sup>1</sup> These individuals represented various employers in Bristol, Plymouth, Plainville, and New Britain. The following is a summary of the input from this focus group.

### Major Employers/Trip Generators

- Bristol Hospital:
  - 90% of people working at Bristol Hospital live within a 10-mile radius– Bristol, Plymouth/Terryville, and Wolcott.
  - Nearly all employees drive, which requires more parking than available on-site.
    - The hospital has over-flow parking off-site and provides a shuttle to take workers to the hospital.
  - Most employees at the hospital start at 7AM.
- Charter Oak State College:
  - This is an online school, so no students attend in-person.
  - Employees work both on-site in New Britain and via telecommuting.
- Dattco:
  - 1,800 employees at various locations, with approximately 500 in New Britain.
- Bristol Rising / Depot Square Development:
  - Small number of on-site employees, but large number of anticipated residents who are expected to work within the area.
  - Developers are looking at what grabs people to decide to go to a particular area to live. Rail would be a selling point.
- Other Major Destinations (as discussed and marked on Figure 1 and Figure 2):
  - Bristol:
    - ESPN (multiple campuses)
    - Southeast Industrial Park (2nd, unnamed business park also shown near Main Street School)
    - Lake Compounce
  - Plainville:
    - CT Commons Retail Center
  - Farmington:
    - Farmington Industrial Park
    - Tunxis Community College
    - GE Plants (north and south)
  - New Britain:
    - Central Connecticut State University (New Britain)
    - New Britain Cancer Center (under construction)
    - Veterans Memorial Stadium

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<sup>1</sup> A key aspect of focus groups is allowing participants to feel as though they can discuss their opinions freely. Thus, the Study Team will not identify the names of focus group participants, nor will specific comments be attributed directly to any one individual.



**How do people get around in the region today?**

- Generally, people drive.
- Some people take the bus to Hartford.
- Increased interest in riding transit to social/recreational events (Hartford Stage, UConn sports).
- Some people suggested that transit is more attractive for people traveling in groups that are greater than can fit in one car anyway (several stakeholders indicated their families do not fit in one vehicle).

**Does your firm offer or do you know of any travel benefits provided to employees?**

- In general there is little transit in the corridor so incentives are not offered, although Bristol Hospital does provide an employee shuttle from their off-site parking lot.
- Current economic conditions have made jobs difficult to get, so employees are willing to take positions and pay the transportation costs without seeking any special benefits from employers.
- State of Connecticut employees are guaranteed a parking spot.
- Bristol Rising is looking to incentivize residents to use transit if they locate within the development.
- Telecommuting is encouraged by Charter Oak.

**If there were a transit service, what would your employees need to be attracted to it?**

- Travel choice is less about driving time, more about inconsistent driving time (due to roadway congestion). Transit will win if it's more reliable than driving.
- Anything that lets people work while commuting increases transit ridership, because then the travel is part of your workday (especially for businesses that allow telecommuting).
- Easy on/easy off (low floor vehicles and safe, easy access to stations)
- 30-minute maximum headways in peak, but it still must be reliable.
- There was some discussion of 5-minute headways, but not likely with rail and probably not worth it. Some bus service could do this, but participants generally agreed this was not the key.
- Flexible work schedules mean some employees will look for weekend service; there is also interest in late night service for younger residents looking to go to entertainment spots (12AM to 1AM).
- The system must be connected to other areas of interest –Berlin, Waterbury, Hartford, New Haven, Bridgeport, NYC, etc.
- Bike racks were mentioned during the focus group by several participants as a great amenity that could be offered on transit vehicles.

**What would the price be for a service like this?**

- It is more important to talk about the value of the trip/service than what the fare is.
- Cars typically cost in the range of \$500 per month (\$300 for the car and \$50/week for gas). A monthly pass needs to be significantly less than that to make up for the inconvenience of multiple transfers and relying on the service's schedule.



- Destination is a key factor – if you’re going to a high value (and farther) destination, like NYC, it’s ok to pay more; if you’re going to Target in Plainville, you don’t want to pay much.
- People also pay for what they can see. That means the station needs to be an easy connection, offer a feeling of safety and security, and include a high-quality station design including lighting. Each of these is an important factor in the value proposition.

**What are the transportation constraints for employers in the corridor?**

- The current economy favors employers so they don’t need to do much to attract employees. Thus, employees are left to figure out a way to get to work.
- Bristol Hospital has a long-term reliable market for employees – people are born there, work there, and die there.

**Is something holding back the ability to attract employees?**

- Even with the noted vehicle congestion, transportation is not a driver in companies’ decision making to locate in this corridor.

**Other notes:**

- In general, Hartford is the preferred destination of most people in the corridor.
- Historically, Bristol has been isolated from a transportation standpoint. It is some distance off of the highway (I-84). It was always fairly self-contained and had a railroad connection and trolley lines.
- Is it possible for a PPP (public-private partnership) like the Downeaster to develop new rail service? Megabus operated by Dattco is providing inter-regional service, such as taking people from UConn Medical in Farmington to UConn in Storrs.
- A new transit service would be attractive to people who live outside of the corridor but want to work here.
- Hartford Stage is looking to attract people beyond the 25-mile point – from places like Waterbury and Danbury. This type of service would be attractive to them.



## Chapter 3. Focus Group #2: Residents

The second focus group included ten attendees.<sup>2</sup> These individuals were residents and employees in Bristol and Plainville, and represented a broad age range. Overall, this group had a high interest in developing transit service throughout this corridor. The following is a summary of the input from this focus group.

### **Major Employers/Trip Generators** (as discussed and marked on Figure 1 and Figure 2)

- Downtown Waterbury
- Downtown Bristol
- Farmington Avenue, Bristol
- ESPN
- Downtown Southington
- CT Commons Retail Center
- Hartford
- West Farms

### **How do people get around in the region today?**

- In general most people use cars to get around.
- Some said they like to park and walk around, especially in comfortable locations like downtown Bristol and the area's parks.
- Destinations outside the corridor include Hartford, New Haven, and Grand Central Terminal.
- The biggest deterrent to going to Hartford is driving. If you attend a late night event you have to drive home and someone has to be designated driver.
- Traffic can also be a deterrent, as well as driving to and parking in Hartford.
- Some people drive as far as Fairfield and take the train into NYC from there. The station is one hour away but offers free parking on the weekend.
- Currently, one person in the group drives to Hartford four times a week. The need to pay for parking would be removed if there was a direct transit service to Hartford. The person previously took Express Bus to Hartford for an extended period of time. The bus was fine, but getting to and from bus station was the issue.

### **If there were a transit service, what would your employees need to be attracted to it?**

- Advantage of train over bus is that the bus has to sit in traffic whereas a train does not.
- Some in the group said no to a bus no matter what, even after explaining that a bus in a dedicated right-of-way would achieve the same travel time as a train. Participants were less interested if the bus would have to go off right-of-way and require a transfer to go into NYC.
- Important to have easy access between station and where you are going as your final destination.

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<sup>2</sup> A key aspect of focus groups is allowing participants to feel as though they can discuss their opinions freely. Thus, the Study Team will not identify the names of focus group participants, nor will specific comments be attributed directly to any one individual.



- Some said they would rather drive and pay for parking than take the bus. Bus is narrower, claustrophobic, and one person said they get motion sickness on a bus. There is an innate disdain for buses.
- Off-corridor connections are very important (e.g. to New Haven, Bridgeport, Hartford, NYC, etc.).
- Also, a train or a bus can get you to a stop, but in this corridor how will you get around after you get to the station. This is the problem of mass transit in suburbia – getting around once you get off.

**Are there places you would go to if it were easier to get there?**

- Columbus Boulevard, Hartford
- Waterbury – don't know where to park there; could do self- discovery of this city if it were easy to get there. Could discover other CT towns as well with a rail service getting you there.
- People in general in this corridor don't know about the (existing) rail line. There are beautiful views from the rail and it would surprise a lot of people.

**What would the price be for a service like this?**

- General consensus was that a \$5-\$8 fare seems reasonable for one way within the corridor. (\$8 being the fare, say, for Berlin to Waterbury and \$5 from New Britain to Plymouth or other segments as examples.)
- Currently, people are paying around \$100 a month for parking, so the service would have to be less than that.
- Convenience of getting to the train needs to be emphasized or the fare does not matter.

**Do you know of any travel benefits offered in the area?**

- One person in the group knew about their company having a pre-tax transit benefit.
- No one in the group is taking transit today.



## Chapter 4. Summary of Findings

- A large number of people both live and work in the Study Area. Commuting to major urban areas (Hartford and New York City) is more limited.
- Offering transit service (either direct or with easy transfers) would create additional demand to travel to Hartford and New York City.
- Any service provided needs to be inviting to the choice rider. To make it inviting it needs to be:
  - Safe (perceived and actual);
  - Attractive vehicles and stations;
  - Easily accessible;
  - Wi-Fi enabled; and
  - Reliable in terms of travel time.
- Encouraging transit travel within the corridor will be difficult because parking is available at all destinations and the connections from stations to many destinations will add more time.
- High frequency service is less important than reasonable schedules that provide reliable travel times.
- Acceptable fares ranged in price similar to the existing Shore Line East rail service, but all agreed it needed to be in line (and slightly less than) daily auto use. Price is less important than reasonable schedules that provide reliable travel times.
- Some significant employers are not actively participating in this process, but their travel demand should be accounted for.
- There is very limited offering and use of transit travel benefits, which may offer an opportunity for reduction of SOV (single occupancy vehicle) travel, regardless of the outcome of this study.
- A large regional map showing the locations frequented by participants of both focus groups is attached to this report.



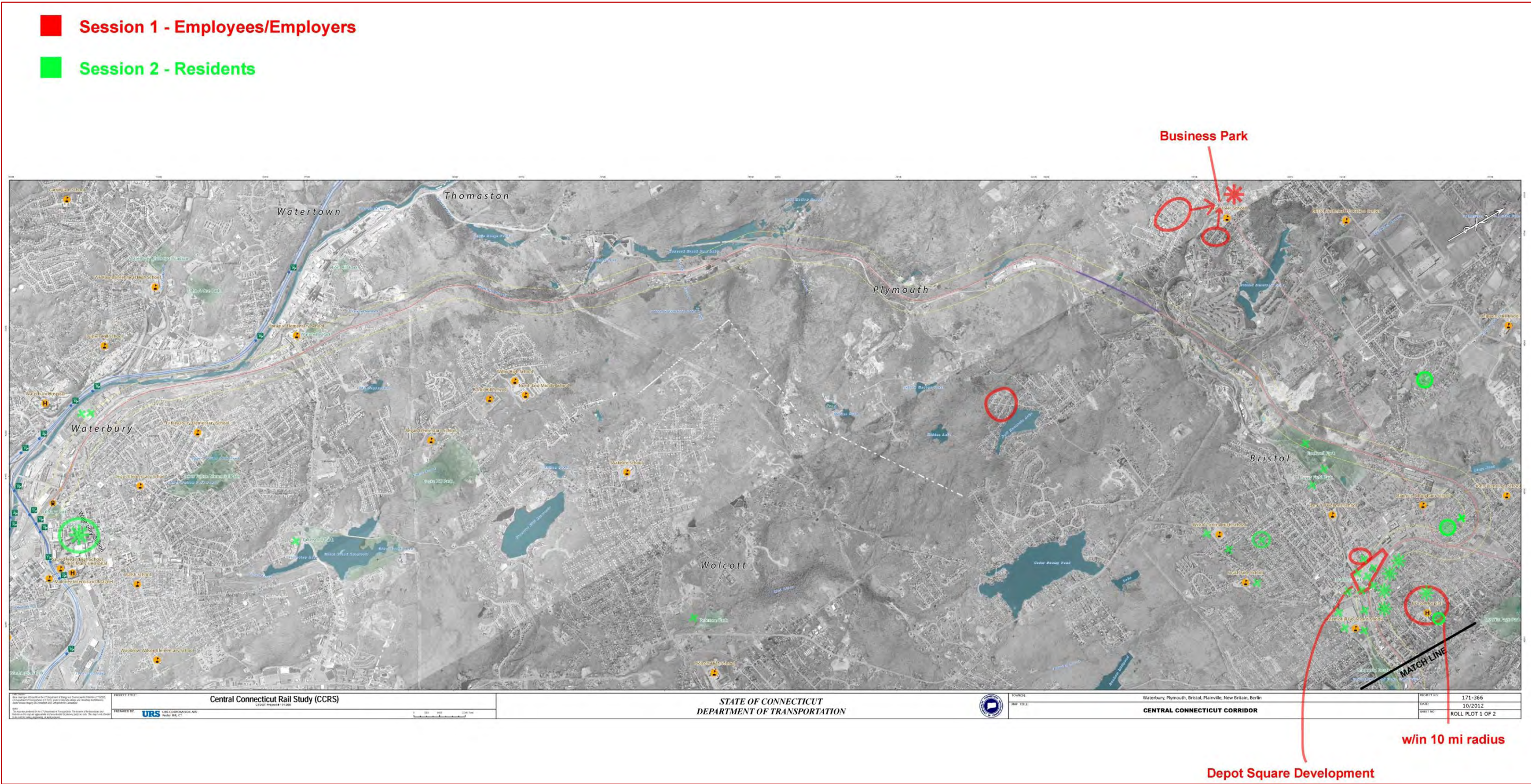


Figure 1: Focus Group Aerial Map Mark-Up, Waterbury to Bristol



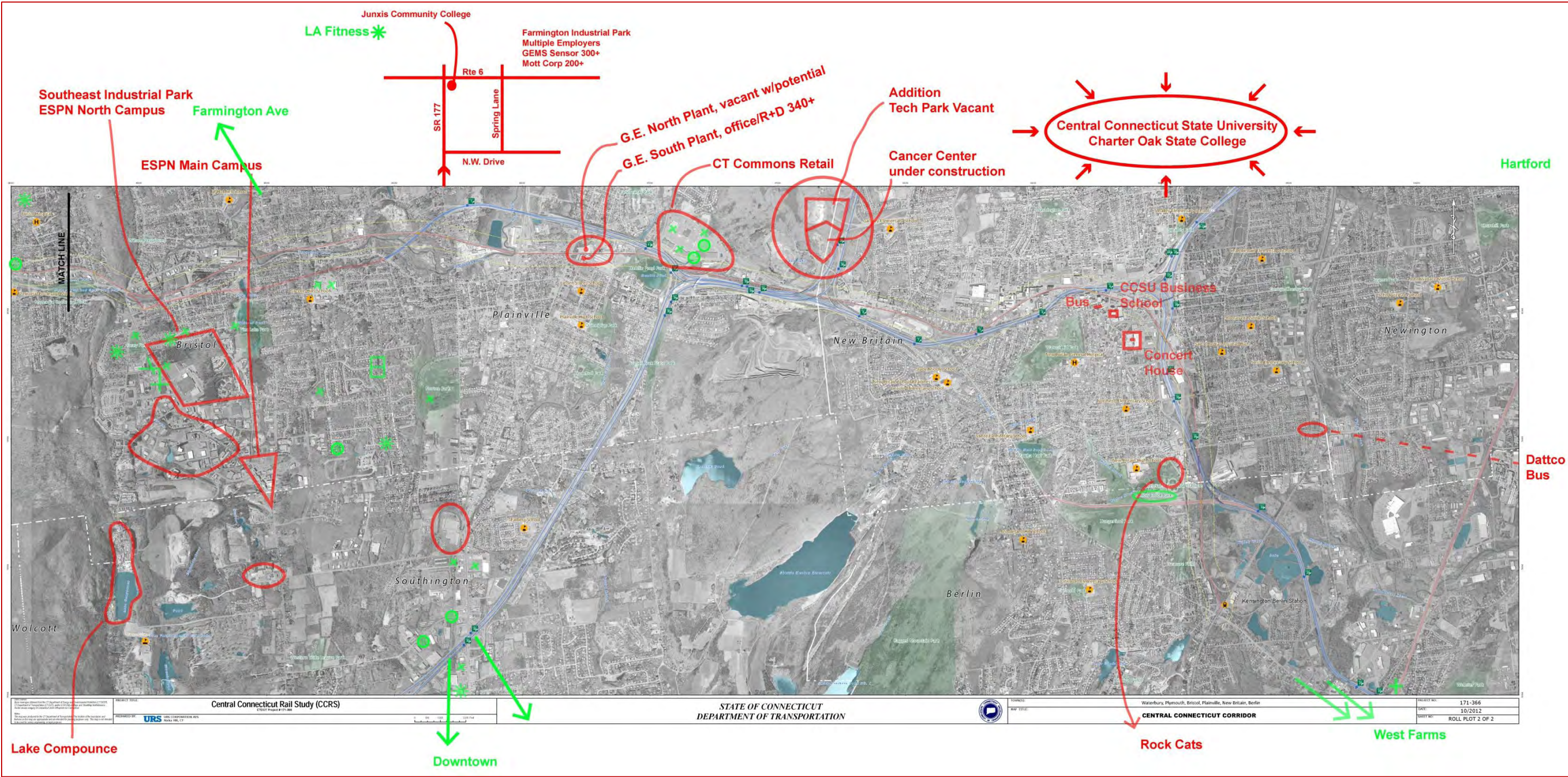


Figure 2: Focus Group Aerial Map Mark-Up, Bristol to Berlin



## Appendix: Focus Group Question Templates

### Questions for Residents

- Using the table top map of the study area, mark the locations you go to/from regularly and say what's there (home, work, school, etc).
- What days/times do you travel there?
- How frequently do you make these trips?
- How do you travel to these places?
- How do you decide how you'll travel to these places?
- Are there places in the study area you would go to if there were easier ways to get there? Where are these places?
- If you are a driver:
  - Did you pay for parking at your destination? How much did it cost?
  - Are there any transit improvements that could be offered that would be enough for you to ride transit for this trip? (route; frequency; time of day; cost)
- If you ride the bus or train:
  - How did you get from your starting point to the bus/train? How did you get from bus/train to your ending point?
  - How much do you pay for the bus/train?

### Questions for Employees

- Using the table top map of the study area, mark the locations you go to/from regularly and say what's there (home, work, school, etc).
- What days/times do you travel there?
- How frequently do you make these trips?
- How do you travel to these places?
- How do you decide how you'll travel to these places?
- Are there places in the study area you would go to if there were easier ways to get there? Where are these places?
- If you are a driver:
  - Did you pay for parking at your destination? How much did it cost?
  - Are there any transit improvements that could be offered that would be enough for you to ride transit for this trip? (route; frequency; time of day; cost)
- If you ride the bus or train:
  - How did you get from your starting point to the bus/train? How did you get from bus/train to your ending point?
  - How much do you pay for the bus/train?

### Questions for Business Owners/Managers/Employers

- Using the table top map of the study area, mark the locations your customers and employees go to/from your business to home or other key points.
- What days/times do they travel to your business?
- How frequently do they make these trips?
- How do they travel to these places?



- How do they decide how you'll travel to these places?
- Do you provide employees with any travel benefits? (Free parking, transit pass, Guaranteed Ride Home, carpool matching, flex time?)
- For your driving customers/employees:
  - Do they pay for parking at your business? How much did it cost?
  - Are there any transit improvements that could be offered that would be enough for them to ride transit for this trip? (route; frequency; time of day; cost)
- If they ride the bus or train:
  - How did they get from the bus/train to your business?
  - How much do they pay for the bus/train?

### **Questions for Economic Development Agencies**

- What transportation access issues are limiting businesses from connecting to their customers and work force? (Roadway links? Parking availability? Transit service? Delivery access?)
- In commercial districts, is parking readily available? Is transit readily available?
- In commercial districts, how much does parking cost? How much does transit cost?
- What Transportation Demand Management programs are available and most utilized? (transit passes, carpool matching, Guaranteed Ride Home, flex time)