

Episode 32 - Park Connect Transcript

00:08.20

Rich Andreski

Hi, I'm Rich Andreski, Bureau Chief for Public Transportation at the Connecticut Department of Transportation. And I'd like to welcome you to Along the Lines, a podcast series where we'll explore our current issues and ideas on Connecticut's public transportation system.

00:29.74

Alicia Gonzalez

Hi, and welcome to another episode of Along the Lines. I'm your guest host, Alicia Gonzalez. I'm a transportation planner too with the Connecticut Department of Transportation, and I am thrilled to be here with you to fill in for Rich Andreski and facilitate an informative and meaningful conversation.

00:49.89

Alicia Gonzalez

Summer is right around the corner. Those are words that many of us long to hear. When we think of summer, many think about backyard barbecues, the summer holidays, and enjoying more outdoor activities. We are fortunate in Connecticut that we have so many beautiful state parks to enjoy.

01:11.47

Alicia Gonzalez

On today's episode, we will talk about the Park Connect Program, which is a collaboration between the Connecticut Department of Transportation and the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. The program provides expanded public transportation, fare free, to popular state parks in Connecticut all summer long.

01:33.98

Alicia Gonzalez

When some people think of public transportation in Connecticut, a common misperception is that it is used just for getting to and from works, shops, or medical appointments. But that is not always the case. Many of our neighbors already use our extensive public transportation network for recreational and leisure activities.

01:55.02

Alicia Gonzalez

Today, I'm honored to be speaking about Park Connect with Mason Trumbull, Deputy Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, and Tyler Roth, Transportation Planner 1 at the Connecticut Department of Transportation Bureau of Public Transportation. Mason, Tyler, welcome to the program.

02:16.00

Mason Trumbull

Thank you, Alicia. Great to be here. Thanks for covering this exciting project today.

02:23.49

Tyler Roth

Yes, thanks for having us, Alicia. I'm very appreciative to be able to have a chance to talk about the Park Connect program today.

02:31.00

Alicia Gonzalez

Absolutely. So Mason, I'd like to start by asking, can you provide our listeners with a summary of the Park Connect program and some background on how the program started?

02:42.27

Mason Trumbull

Absolutely. So as you mentioned, Alicia, the Park Connect program is a way to connect public transportation to our ah incredible network of state parks located all throughout Connecticut. And we really can't start talking about this program without rewinding to the early days of the pandemic when we saw an incredible spike in demand for outdoor recreation.

03:11.41

Mason Trumbull

And that increase in demand has continued since the pandemic as folks are more interested in enjoying the outdoor recreation opportunities across the state. and you know folks feel more comfortable being outdoors generally, so our state parks across the state have turned into venues for social connection. And then as the pandemic has tapered off, I think people have continued to appreciate their newfound love of the outdoors and we have seen the demand for outdoor recreation stay high across the state.

03:45.90

Mason Trumbull

So, again, rewinding back to 2020, we saw quite a bit of parks being closed and just due to parking lot spilling out. And so we decided to try to find a way to fix that. And obviously connecting parks to public transportation is a way to alleviate the parking. But not only does it just solve the capacity problem at parks, it also touches on another important piece, which we're trying to solve as well, which is the equity piece.

04:18.04

Mason Trumbull

Most of our state parks are designed to be accessed through through cars and vehicles. And so the park connect program allows folks who may not have access to a vehicle or who may prefer not to drive to be able to access public transportation and still be able to enjoy outdoor recreation.

04:38.23

Alicia Gonzalez

You know, and that's so interesting, Mason. You know, you've touched on a couple of things. You've touched on, you know, people's need for for fresh air and to kind of be outside, especially in a pandemic, which was so confining, um you know, literally and physically. And, ah you know, the capacity of parking lots, equity, ah ownership of a vehicle. How do these coincide with the intended goals of the program?

05:04.27

Mason Trumbull

Yes. So very simply, the goals were derived from the need. So we had two goals in this program. ah The first one was focused on equity. And so you know we were trying to find a way to allow anyone to get to a state park, whether they had access to a vehicle or not. And so the first one was making sure we have equitable access for all people to enjoy our state park system and be able to get that fresh air you were just talking about.

05:33.03

Mason Trumbull

And then secondly, the goal is to alleviate some of the ah traffic congestion and capacity related issues that we were seeing in some of our ah more popular shoreline parks. So um again, connecting parks to cities and public transportation is really the overarching goal of the program. And we are we ran a pilot last year. We're glad to see some initial success and are looking forward to running it again this year.

06:02.68

Alicia Gonzalez

So you speaking of the program last year, Tyler, you know, we've seen traction in the program's first year. Can you let us know how many people took advantage of the program last year and why you think that it's meaningful?

06:16.00

Tyler Roth

That's a great question, Alicia. Before I touch on that topic, I'd like to just take a brief moment to describe the Park Connect program in greater detail on how it was designed for listeners who might be unaware of the Park Connect program.

06:29.24

Tyler Roth

um The Park Connect program is a seasonal program that was designed to advertise existing new or enhanced service to state parks from Memorial Day weekend to Labor Day. State parks were initially identified by the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and prioritized by analyzing their existing distance from our current bus transit network, using geographic information systems called GIS, and then the feasibility of new or enhanced service to the state parks were determined by the service provider's vehicle availability, scheduling, and staffing capabilities. We then identified and prioritized free daily bus service seven days a week to five state parks and saw around 2,800 passenger trips across the 10 advertised bus services to parks in the program's first pilot year.

07:13.86

Tyler Roth

So the the program really began to pick up traction probably sometime in early to mid July of its pilot year after we were able to show that we could reliably and safely get people outside to the parks during ah the summer, during the pandemic, while using new and enhanced bus service that um was ah created for the first time um as part of this pilot program.

07:37.24

Tyler Roth

um And as Mason had touched on, this was ah really important because we saw a lot of parks with beaches fill up early that year. I don't know about you, but every time I tried to go to Hammonssset um Beach State Park, ah it would fill up early in the morning, even on weekdays. So ah these services provide an opportunity for people to find connections to get to the parks when the vehicle um ah capacity has reached its limit and in the parking lots there.

08:03.37

Tyler Roth

And we expect a ah lot higher demand going into the second year of the program since this program is now more widely known. ah We have a stronger marketing initiative this year. And I think that ah rising fuel prices and inflation will make ah the free bus service that we're providing to these parks a more attractive option.

08:21.41

Alicia Gonzalez

That's great. And you're right. I did attempt to go to the beach and sometimes I wasn't able to find a spot. And there is nothing more disappointing after you've put sunscreen on than not finding a spot at the beach. So it's very clear that a lot of thought went into this program, a lot of analysis and evaluation of data to try to identify the appropriate state parks and the transit services that can make these connections and enable people to take advantage of the beautiful parks that we do have in the state.

08:50.49

Alicia Gonzalez

um So can you talk a little bit more now about how the public, our listeners, how can they take advantage of Park Connect? And, you know, when does it start? Which state parks are part of this program and what changes are in store for this year?

09:09.00

Tyler Roth

Thanks, Alicia. I will do my best to try to make inform everybody about this year's program. um So riders will be able to take advertised bus service to the state parks in this year's program beginning May 28. And they'll be able to ah use these services through September 5th. Services will operate on Mondays where Memorial Day, Independence Day and Labor Day holidays are observed. Buses will be free statewide through December 1 of this year.

09:39.97

Tyler Roth

So we've made some changes to this year's program from last year's program. ah We've scaled back the daily seven day a week service to focus mainly on weekend service where we saw the greater demand. So, Bluff Point State Park is no longer part of the Park Connect program this year due to low demand, ah but we have added a few new state parks. We've added Osbourndale State Park and Indian Well State Park in Valley Transit District service area and Sherwood Island State Park in the Westport Transit District service area. So we've added three new state parks this year, and we've only removed one ah state park from the prior year's pilot program.

10:15.54

Tyler Roth

Both of the new transit districts that are operating service for the three new state parks are operating on-demand service, which is a new form of service that the program is operating this year. Valley Transit District will allow riders to call in to schedule same day ride reservations, while Westport Transit District will allow riders to download the Wheels2U app to schedule a ride.

10:38.06

Alicia Gonzalez

Thanks, Tyler. That's fantastic. So there's a couple of things I want to just reiterate. The program lasts from May 28th to September 5th. And let's emphasize, fare free. How exciting is that? ah Mason, for people new to the state or those who may not be familiar, ah what are some of the activities they can do at these parks? And can you just state each of the parks that are participating in this year's program?

11:07.75

Mason Trumbull

Absolutely, Alicia. The whole point of this program is to allow people to get outside and have fun. And there are seven very cool parks that you can take public transportation to and really enjoy an incredible day outdoors. I'm going to go through the list. So we have Hammond Asset Beach State Park in Madison, Silver Sands State Park in Milford, Fort Trumbull State Park in New London, Sleeping at Giant State Park in Hamden, Osbornedale State Park in Derby, Indian Rail State Park in Shelton, and Sherwood Island State Park in Norwalk.

12:44.79

Mason Trumbull

So quite a list of seven parks, and we chose those parks ah very strategically. First of all, ah four of them have an asset. Silver Sands, Indian Rail, and Sherwood Island offer swimming, and we know that in the summer months, ah the ability to get out, cool off, ah whether it's in the ocean or one of our freshwater swimming areas, incredibly popular for folks to experience. And one of the largest draws to our parks, we see our parks filling up on those days where the temperature soars over 80 degrees and higher and so we wanted to focus on making sure that swimming was an option that we prioritize with these parks.

12:27.66

Mason Trumbull

What's also really cool was Hamanasset Beach State Park. just That's our flagship park, one of our, it is the most popular park ah in Connecticut. And not only can you swim there, you can, we actually have ah one of the largest campgrounds on the East Coast at Hamanasset Beach State

Park. And so this is important from a tourism perspective as well, because you can hop on a train in New York City, um take Metro North all the way up and then connect from the train station to the park

12:58.55

Mason Trumbull

And that provides the opportunity to go camping by train. So cool opportunity there for folks who maybe would like to spend a weekend away from the city, camping on the beach at Hammond Asset. what ah What a great way to spend the weekend. um A couple other parks where we have some exciting outdoor activities as well are ah you know Fort Trumbull State Park and Osburnale State Park. Some opportunities to go fishing there.

13:25.89

Mason Trumbull

And Sleeping Giant State Park, definitely our most popular hiking park in the state. So really we chose these parks to provide a variety of options for folks who are looking to get outdoors in a variety of different ways. And we think this program gives folks quite a few options ah depending on what they would like to do outdoors.

13:47.40

Alicia Gonzalez

So hashtag camping by train. I think that is got to be a new slogan and we're going to have to tell our marketing folks about that one. I really like that. um You know, you've talked about some of the benefits, Mason, that that us as individuals and residents of Connecticut um and and and more can enjoy at the state parks. What overall benefits do the state parks themselves see from the Park Connect program?

14:15.00

Mason Trumbull

That's a great question. You know, our park visitation right now is actually currently very diverse. We have a lot of different folks from all around the state, our cities, our rural areas from out of state who come to Connecticut or who visit state parks in Connecticut. And so the really the benefit to our state parks is this just provides that opportunity for more people. People who live in cities, people who depend on public transportation now have an easier and better way to get to parks. And as we said before, it this really does help us on those very busy weekends and day and holidays, when our parks fill up, this allows more folks the opportunity to be able to get that ah prime spot on the beach in the sun.

15:02.37

Alicia Gonzalez

You know Mason, you touched on something earlier that I think is really important. and Tyler, I'd like for you to elaborate a little bit more on how important the Park Connect program is ah you know because it provides access to state parks to Connecticut's residents that do not own or maintain a personal vehicle. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

15:25.00

Tyler Roth

Of course, and I'd be glad to. um I'm sure that all of us on the podcast today agree that the state parks should be accessible for all Connecticut residents regardless of whether or not they have access to or own their own vehicles. Basically, the inability to own a vehicle shouldn't preclude them from enjoying the many benefits and activities that Mason has described are available at each of these parks.

15:47.34

Tyler Roth

um And so the park connect program was designed to prioritize connections to um existing bus routes, rail lines and urban centers and other dense residential areas across the state so that we can get people to the state parks without having to have a car.um So ah there are many different ways to ah reach different state parks um from all over the state. And ah many people spend hours visiting these parks on the weekends. So um I believe they'll find the frequency of these services to be um ah good enough for them to plan a trip on weekends while using the Park Connect service.

16:23.53

Alicia Gonzalez

Thank you. And I couldn't agree more. No one should be precluded from enjoying the beauty that our state has to offer ah simply due to the status of owning or not owning a vehicle. That being said, I should note that even if you do have your own car, the Park Connect program can benefit you. Can you talk about that too?

16:45.93

Tyler Roth

Sure. you know As I mentioned earlier, you know we're facing rising gas prices, um inflation right now, so everybody's trying to you know save a little bit of extra money. um so you know ah Even if you have your own car, being able to ah ride public transportation for free ah throughout the summer while using the Park Connect program to get to the parks, you're going to be saving yourself money.

17:10.38

Tyler Roth

um In addition to that, you know there's also the climate change initiatives and and benefits to taking your car off the road and proving air quality for your neighbors. And again, I you know we can't we can't advertise enough how important it is to have this fair free service. But there is the exception of some on-demand services like Wheels to You on weekdays that are premium services that will still be charging fares. But I want people to know that um the service to the parks, if you can find any service that directly takes you to the parks for this year's program, you will be able to ride those services for free.

17:45.75

Alicia Gonzalez

You know, you touched on something, so let's pivot a little bit. Climate change, air quality, these are topics that we often explore on this podcast. Mason, can you tell us how this program helps fight climate change and reduces our carbon footprint?

18:02.00

Mason Trumbull

Absolutely. That's something that we are very passionate about here at the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. You know, one of the benefits of this program is, as Tyler said, reducing emissions, improving air quality. you know In the summer months, there's higher ozone levels due to the increased sunlight and increased travel, as many folks go on vacation, et cetera. So this kind of is this Park Connect program provides a solution for both of those by are giving folks the opportunity to travel and visit a state park without ah contributing to emissions.

18:44.48

Mason Trumbull

So you know we're encouraging folks, whether you have a car or not, if you have access to, if you're an area or near a park that is being serviced by the Park Connect program, we would encourage you to ride the bus or take the public transportation and reduce emissions. And you know the cool part about that is, as Tyler mentioned, it is free ah to go to a park. Our Passport to the Parks program allows any car with a Connecticut license plate to access our parks for free. And so this program is providing that service as well for folks who are willing to ride public transportation. So we wanted to provide that incentive for folks to make sure that we're encouraging the reduction of admissions through the Park Connect program.

19:39.35

Alicia Gonzalez

And Mason, while we still have you on, can you share some news about recent or planned statewide improvements to the state's park system?

19:44.18

Mason Trumbull

Absolutely. I always love talking about making our parks better. of So we do have some some very recent good news. The budget was just finalized coming out of the legislative session and the governor had put forward a strong proposal to support parks this year. You know our park system we have 142 state parks across the state of Connecticut and you know parks are well loved. They are highly visited here in Connecticut.

20:13.94

Mason Trumbull

And so many of those buildings, whether they're ah bathrooms or infrastructure such as roads and and paving and things of that nature, those are those are in disrepair. We have about \$150 million of maintenance backlog across our state park system. And so in this year's budget, we have \$50 million dollars set aside to ah start to address that backlog. So that's encouraging news. you know Folks always ask, well, what are you going to build? And the answer is, well, we're going to fix a lot of things.

20:47.06

Mason Trumbull

And you know we we see this kind of maintenance backlog as something that you know maybe we're not building the big new building, but we are going to be fixing, improving, replacing many very important buildings, bathrooms, repaving, investing in our historic infrastructure. Fort Trumbull's on this list. That's ah an expensive, historic building that needs to constantly be repaired. And so you know we're looking at investing some of this or investing this \$50 million dollars in infrastructure across the state that will, at the end of the day, make the park experience much better and much more pleasant for the people who are visiting our parks.

22:36.43

Alicia Gonzalez

That is really wonderful and and really encouraging. Congratulations on that. ah You know, to close, I have to say it's really refreshing to see such an important service as Park Connect being brought to the public via a collaborative effort between two state agencies and our dedicated staff and our dedicated transit operators, lest we forget them. um They're so important to the fabric of this program.

22:03.03

Alicia Gonzalez

I would like to just ask both of you, Mason and Tyler, what was it like working together on this and what are you most proud of?

22:12.00

Mason Trumbull

Well, I'm glad to go first on that one. You man you said it, Alicia, with collaboration. I think, you know, that's definitely been the overarching theme is the spirit of working together for a common goal and When we first met, know we all talked about the goal of increasing equitable access to the outdoors for all people in Connecticut. And I think that's something that the team really gathered around and embraced that mission and worked together. You know these type of programs are not easy to set up. There's many different challenges.

22:49.16

Mason Trumbull

And I just have to say a huge thank you to both the staff at the Department of Energy and Environmental for Protection and the staff at the Department of Transportation who really work together very well to set this program up ah despite the many challenges and so thank you and we are looking forward to another round of Park Connect this summer.

23:15.00

Tyler Roth

Thanks Mason. um I really appreciate the kind words um and praise for our staff. I agree this was a very collaborative process. I mean, both between ah deep and DOT, you know, various um external stakeholders we have. um you know, about half a dozen service providers that are involved in providing service um across the state. And, you know, ah like Mason said, we're really trying to prioritize the equitable access to these parks. And that's that's something I'm very proud of of this program. um ah You know, I believe we we did we did the groundwork to to make sure that we were providing adequate service, um that the new service that we planned was going to be adequate.

23:59.28

Tyler Roth

I believe ah you actually said this to me the other day, Alicia, but you know we have as about as ah many parks as we do towns that are being served through this program. um And so we have we have a ah ah diverse array of parks with different activities to do all across the state. And ah there's many ways to get to them. You can you can ride rail and and make a connection to, you know, you could take Shoreline East and connect to the Clinton Trolley in downtown Clinton to get to Hammonasset, or you could park at the park and ride at Madison and take the Madison Shuttle, um or you can get on the 645 up in Middletown and and ride down and get to the park at Hammonasset ah Beach State Park that way as well.

24:37.93

Tyler Roth

um And so, you know, I'm really excited that we're able to do that and also provide the opportunity for people to decide to switch away from using their own personal vehicles. um I think being able to take these services when parks are at capacity, especially the more popular parks, is a huge benefit as well.

24:58.04

Alicia Gonzalez

Thank you. Are there any final thoughts? And actually, where can people find out more information about this program?

25:06.00

Mason Trumbull

I can answer that one, Alicia. Final thoughts. We encourage anyone listening to this podcast to get out, visit a state park and ride the bus or take public transportation to get there. And as far as how can you find out more about this, you can visit the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. ah Easiest way, website, the easiest way to access that is ah simply in your browser, search Park Connect Connecticut. And that should pull up the first result in the search result should be the website you were looking for and that will detail how to access the specific routes for each park. So thank you and we hope to see you in the parks this summer.

25:51.89

Alicia Gonzalez

Well, on behalf of DOT, we are thrilled to once again collaborate with the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection to offer the Park Connect program for the summer of 2022. As you've heard, this program provides more access to the most popular state parks in Connecticut while benefiting our air quality and reducing harmful greenhouse gases.

26:17.61

Alicia Gonzalez

I invite everyone to use the service and enjoy a stress-free day at one of our state parks. I would like to thank our guests, Mason Trumbull from the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, and Tyler Roth from the Connecticut Department of Transportation, as well as everyone who was involved in bringing Park Connect and this podcast to fruition.

26:42.36

Alicia Gonzalez

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You can also find previous episodes and more information on our new website alongthelinesct.com. Until next time, support your state parks, ride transit, reduce emissions, and oh yeah, wear sunscreen.

27:12.49

Rich Andreski

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