



Fed Up: Traffic on the I-95 Corridor

Report #1: Norwalk

CHRIS 
MURPHY

The Human Cost of Traffic in Connecticut

By the Office of Senator Chris Murphy

A Note to the Reader:

I launched the *Fed Up* campaign because I wanted to hear directly from commuters about their struggles. The response was overwhelming. I heard from over a thousand people who spend hours in traffic each day: a barber who travels from Waterbury to Stamford every day on the Metro-North branch line forced to choose between extra work and dinner with his family; a father of triplets who desperately needs to be home to take care of his kids; a business owner who loses revenue for his company and employees as a direct result of congestion.

Equipped with these real stories from real people, I'm bringing the *Fed Up* campaign into its next phase. My goal is to marry the voices of commuters with real data and use both to propose and advance a set of policies to improve commutes in Connecticut. As such, I will be releasing a series of reports that will each focus on specific towns along the I-95 corridor from New Haven to the New York border. It's impossible to fix the entire corridor all at once, which is why I am taking a town-by-town approach and focusing on what's fixable. This report will focus on Norwalk.

We need a long-term vision for a people-focused transportation system—one that ensures commuters can make it home in time for dinner and safely get to their jobs and their children's schools.

I encourage you to spread the word on my campaign and to share your stories with me if you haven't already by visiting: <http://www.murphy.senate.gov/fedup>.

Sincerely,



U.S. Senator Chris Murphy

Why Norwalk Commuters are Fed Up

“ The ride home is always miserable. I chose to give up one hour of valuable sleep every morning to cut down on the commuting time. By the end of the week I am exhausted. It absolutely has an impact on work performance and family harmony.”

Kristin, Norwalk Commuter

“ Being away from home 12 hours a day (to work an 8 hour day) does have an impact on any family. The aggravation of driving I-95 or the Merritt Parkway is immeasurable.”

Bethany, Norwalk Commuter

“ It takes over 30 hours a month away from my family.”

Charles, Norwalk Commuter

“ I would like to get home earlier and see my child and wouldn't have to pay my baby sitter so much.”

Javier, Norwalk Commuter

“ Going home, I usually do not get home until about 6:30/7:00 if I leave work at 5:00. Cuts into family time with my wife and son. Cannot make it to meetings for my position in church.”

James, Norwalk Commuter

“ My commute has consumed my life. After working 9 hours a day, throw a 3-4 hour commute on that, there is no time for family or to do anything personal. ”

Ereic, Norwalk Commuter

“ With a shorter commute I could get more sleep, work out, and participate in more activities at work. ”

Emilia, Norwalk Commuter

Key Findings of Fed Up Norwalk Survey

I heard from hundreds of Norwalk residents and commuters through multiple platforms. In 2015, I launched an online *Fed Up* survey, which received more than 450 responses. I held office hours at a Merritt Parkway gas station, live-streamed and live-Tweeted my experience of sitting in traffic during rush hour on 95, and most recently I hosted a *Fed Up* town hall that was open to the public at the Norwalk Library. Though the experiences of individual commuters showed variation, an analysis of all Norwalk commuter feedback showed the following recurring themes:

- Norwalk residents travel using various modes of transportation, including traveling by car, rail, bus, and foot—often in the same day—and they want multiple, safe, and reliable transportation options.
- Norwalk commuters are frustrated by the traffic and congestion on I-95 in Fairfield County—particularly at the exit 16 on- and off-ramps.
- Norwalk commuters want Metro-North travel times to Stamford and Grand Central to improve, and they want the Walk Bridge fixed.
- Parking at or near Metro-North stations is nearly impossible if you don't already have a spot.

Recommendations Based on Norwalk Feedback

1. Improvements to the I-95 Exit 16 Interchange ramps and East Avenue are needed but not yet programmed by the Connecticut Department of Transportation. A feasibility study initiated to identify improvements would cost between \$150,000 and \$550,000.
2. Relieve parking demand at Metro-North stations by a) adding parking and upgrading technology for parking management or by b) investing in transportation demand management and transit, shuttle, walking and cycling connections for rail. Costs could range from \$200,000 for new parking technology to tens of millions of dollars for parking expansion and connectivity improvements.
3. Expedite Norwalk Walk Bridge improvements, which will increase Metro-North reliability. Total funding for the project is approximately \$500 million.

Interstate 95 Corridor—An Exit-by-Exit Analysis

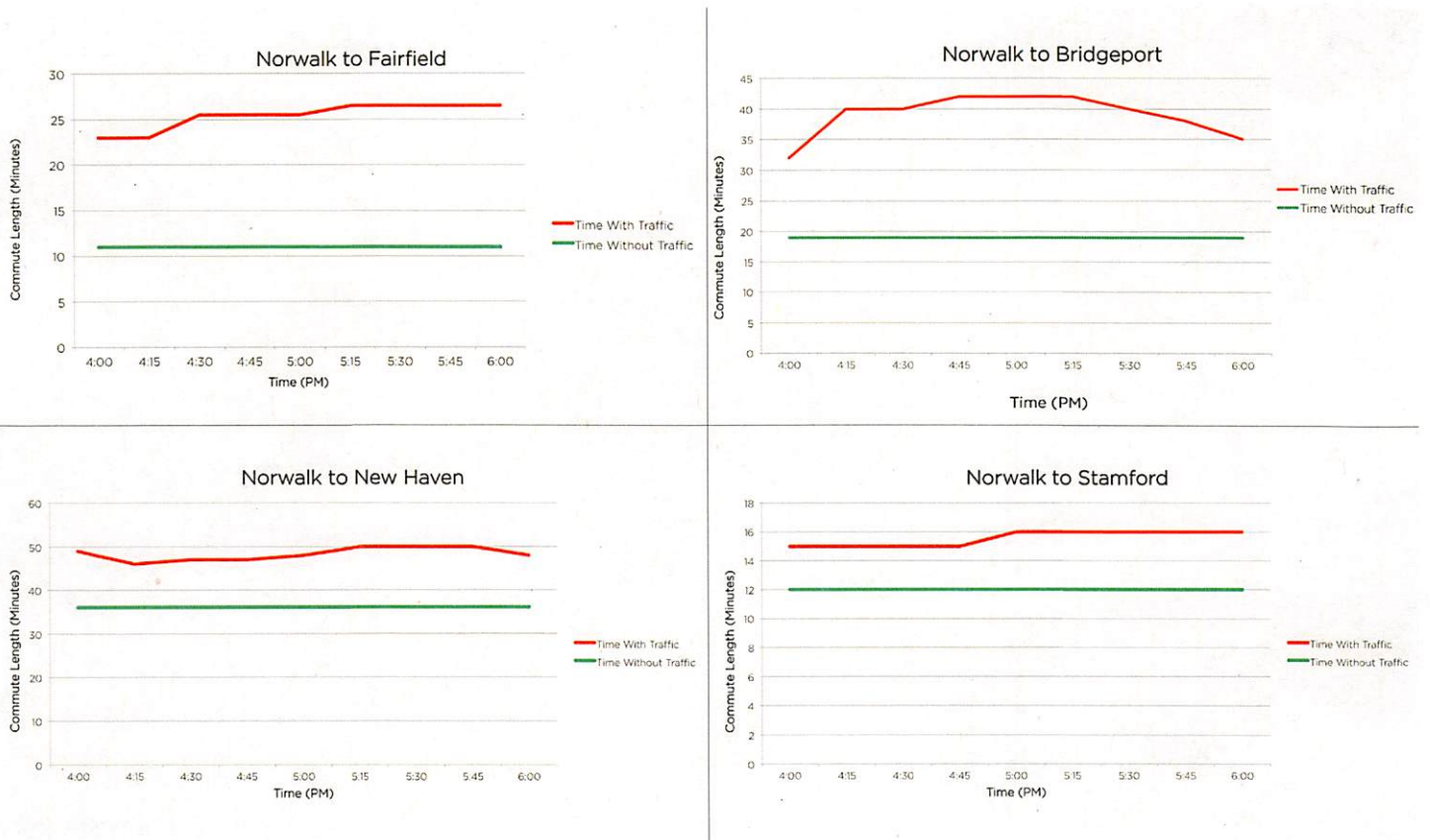
The United States was once the vanguard of transportation infrastructure. In the 19th Century, we built and boasted the most extensive and sophisticated rail infrastructure system in the world. In the 20th Century, we executed the largest construction project—the Interstate Highway System. However, after years of underinvestment, our country’s leadership in transportation infrastructure has waned.

The busiest interstate highway in the country, I-95, stretches from Maine to Florida, cutting through southern Connecticut and following along our state’s coast. Each day, hundreds of thousands of people enter and exit the highway—by far Connecticut’s busiest. The Interstate serves as the backbone for the state and for the region, and the lives of many residents are punctuated by time spent—often exasperatingly—driving on it. But what became clear from the commuters I heard from is that this is not an “I-95” story so much as a story of specific stretches of the highway commuters see every day, making an exit-by-exit analysis more pertinent to the average commuter than a broad analysis that focuses on the entire corridor. As such, I will be releasing a series of reports that will go town-by-town and exit-by-exit to drill down on commuter experiences from New Haven to the New York border. This report will focus on exits 14, 15, and 16 in Norwalk, as well as key features like Metro-North.



Norwalk

Norwalk is home to three exits on I-95—exits 14, 15, and 16. The on-ramps and off-ramps of these exits connect people to the corridors of one of the state’s most vibrant cities, connecting the city’s 88,000 residents to their homes, businesses, and jobs.

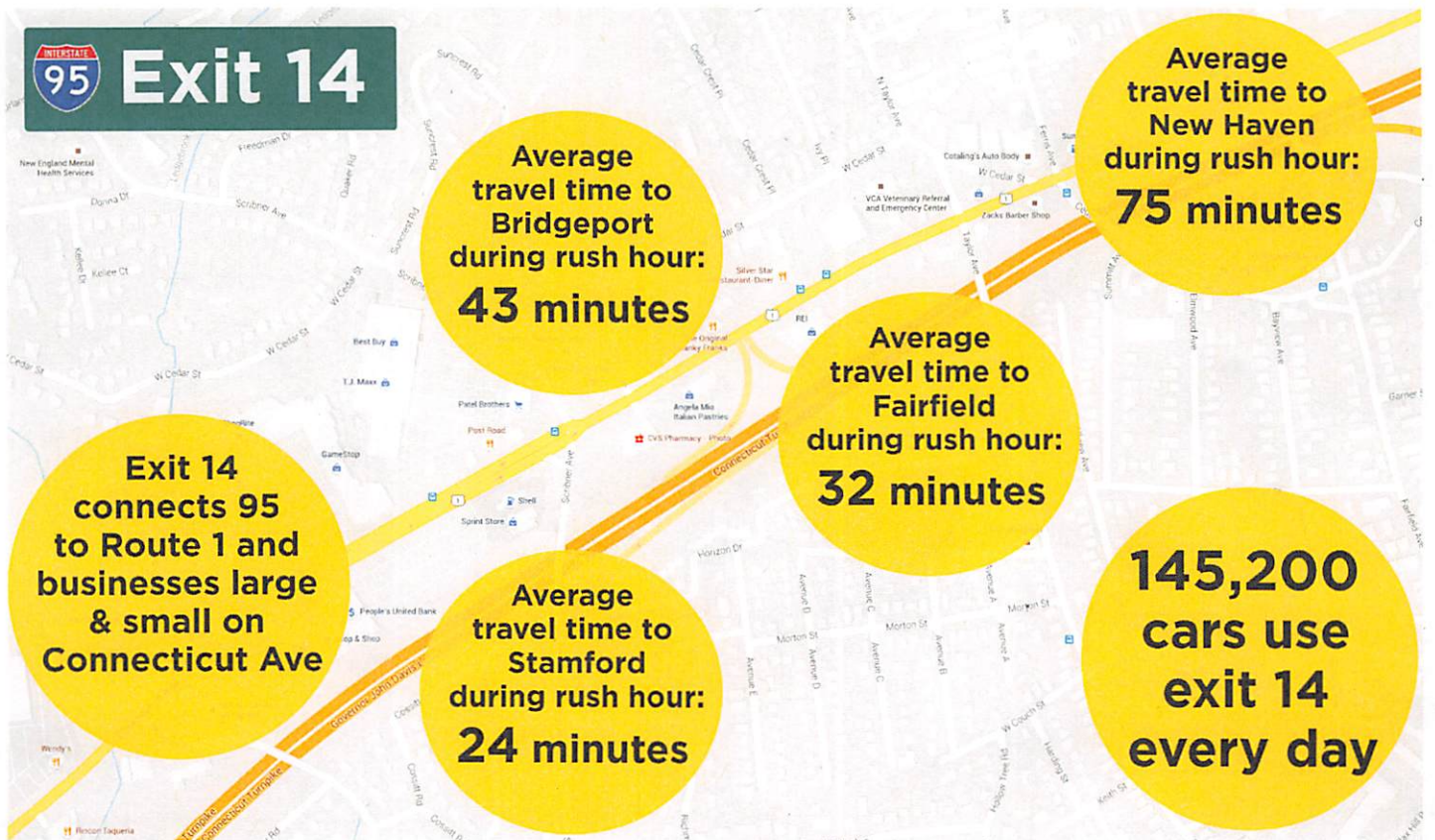


**The data above were compiled using a Google Maps analytics tool that computes average travel times.*

Exit 14

This exit was the site of extensive upgrades completed in late 2015. The southbound off-ramp, previously characterized by a two lane approach starting under the Taylor Avenue Bridge, was expanded to include a three lane approach. Further, instead of two lanes at the off-ramp, the off-ramp now has three lanes—two of which allow for a left turn onto Route 1 and one of which allows drivers to proceed straight—providing easy access to the gas station across the street or into the Silver Star Diner, or a right turn onto Route 1. The southbound on-ramp from Route 1 was also reconfigured to accommodate two lanes as opposed to one.

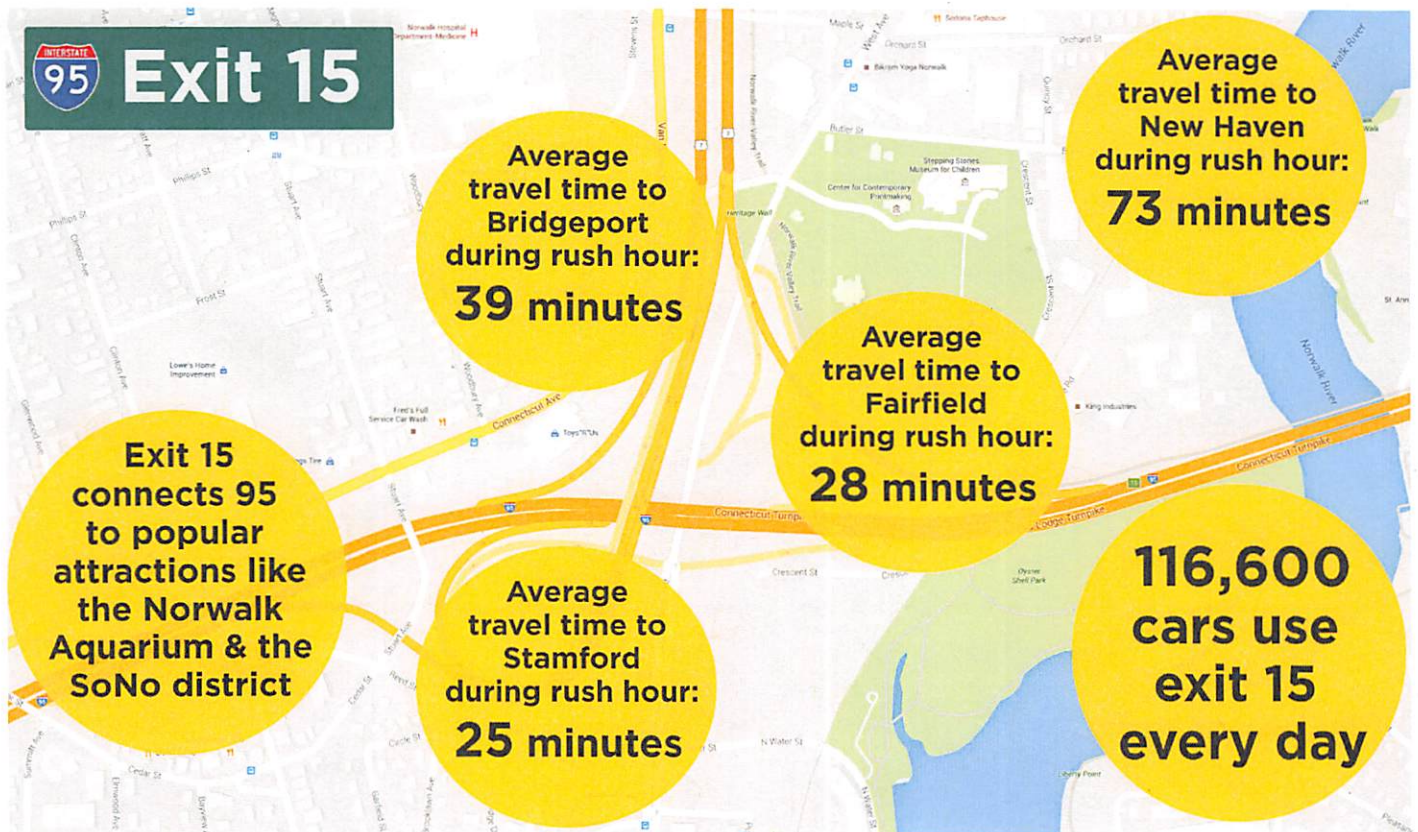
On the northbound side, the on-ramp from Scribner Avenue was repaved and widened to accommodate two lanes. These updates, coupled with the northbound exit updates, have significantly alleviated the queuing backing up into the highways that came up during rush hours.



Exit 15

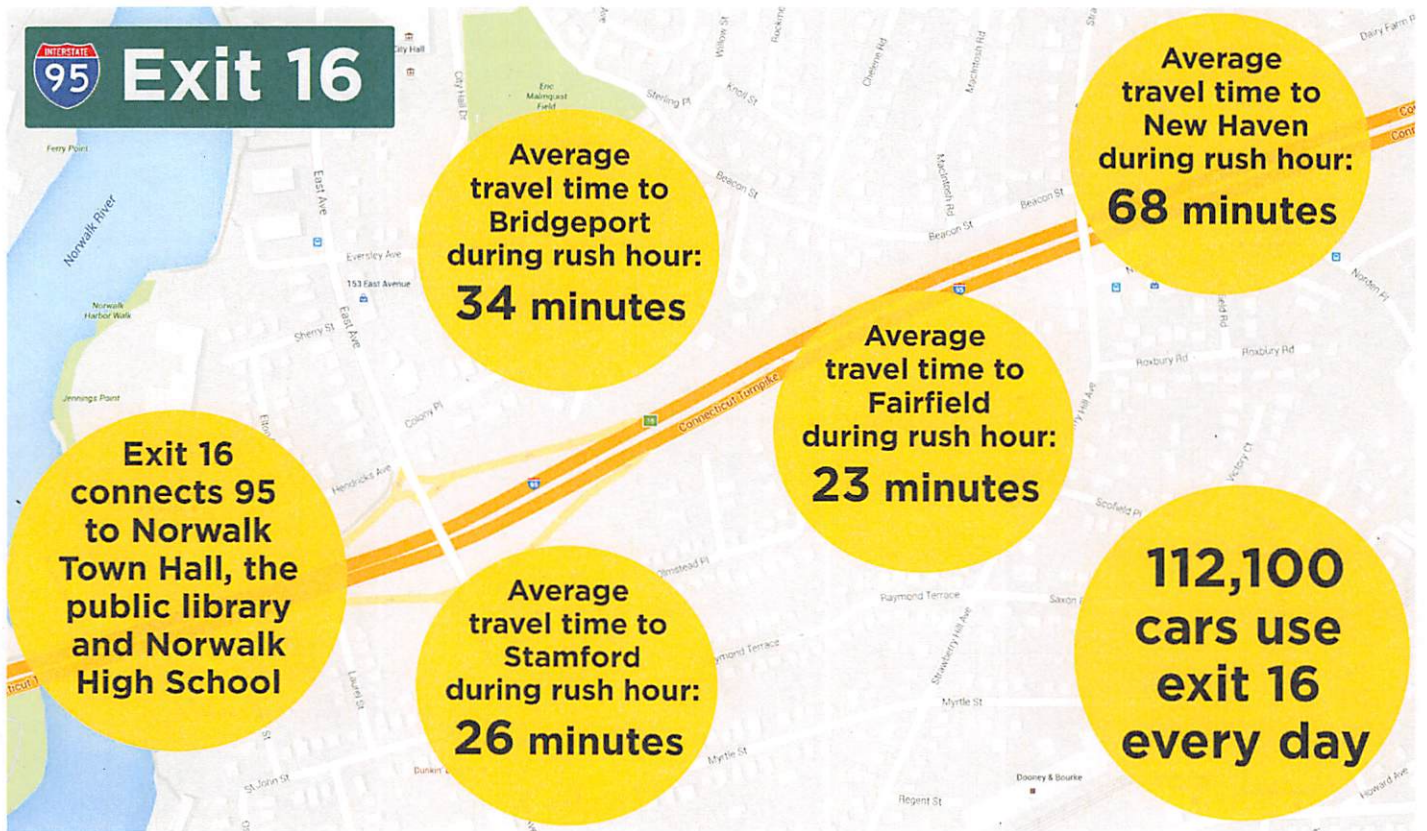
Route 7, which connects Norwalk to Danbury through Wilton, meets I-95 at exit 15. The southbound exit off 95 allows drivers to continue onto Route 7 north or onto West Avenue, which runs north-south and connects the post office, Norwalk Public Library, numerous single-family homes, multi-family residences, and businesses to the north with the burgeoning South Norwalk neighborhood—home to the South Norwalk Metro-North station, the Norwalk Aquarium, and numerous bars and restaurants—to the south.

The city is planning to develop two vacant parcels just south of 95—one between Crescent Street and North Water Street and the other between North Water Street and Putnam Avenue. These plans still need to be finalized and approved; nonetheless, planning for traffic generation is already beginning. The parcels will be the site of a mall and boutique hotel measuring approximately 900,000 square feet. The mall will be anchored by Nordstrom on the northern parcel and by a Bloomingdales on the southern parcel. Both sides of the mall will be bisected by North Water Street, with an over-street bridge connecting the two sides.



Exit 16

The northbound exit onto East Avenue—particularly the two left turn lanes—has long been a source of distress for Norwalk commuters. Likewise, there are queues for traffic using the southbound exit to East Avenue. The traffic volume on East Avenue is also one of the highest in the city, with 30,000 vehicles per day north of I-95 and more than 20,000 vehicles per day south of I-95. Improvements on the Exit 16 ramps and the East Avenue overpass and approaches are needed



Metro-North

Metro-North's New Haven Line carries over 125,000 passengers daily and is one of the country's busiest commuter rail lines. Norwalk is home to both the East Norwalk and South Norwalk stations on the Line. Both serve as anchors for their respective neighborhoods and as a means of commuting to Stamford and Grand Central—the latter of which is forty-one miles from the South Norwalk Station and approximately one hour away by train. The South Norwalk Metro-North Railroad Station is also the point where the Danbury Branch Line connects with Metro-North's New Haven Line, the Northeast Rail Corridor, and Amtrak service.

In town halls and surveys, commuters repeatedly bemoaned the lack of adequate parking options for Metro-North commuters. The parking options that surround the two stations are inadequate to meet demand, as there is a waiting list for parking spots at all garages and lots adjacent to the stations. The city is exploring a circulator-type system that would allow commuters to park closer to their residences. The circulator would potentially connect the densely populated northern West Avenue corridor with the South Norwalk Station. The Danbury Branch Line stop, Merritt 7, just north of the Merritt Parkway, is programmed for station improvements. The recently completed Danbury Branch Line communications system has increased reliability and convenience. Several trains provide a one-seat ride—i.e. a ride that does not necessitate changing trains—between the Branch Line and the New Haven Line.

Walk Bridge

At 120 years old, the Walk Bridge in Norwalk is the single oldest movable bridge along the New Haven Line in Connecticut. The too frequent malfunctions of the bridge leave people stranded for hours and sometimes require emergency busing. Such delays paralyze commuters throughout Connecticut, as problems on one part of the line reverberate throughout the rest of the line.

Recognizing the urgent need for repairs, the federal government awarded \$161 million in discretionary grant funding for the design and replacement of the bridge. Another \$509 million in state and federal funding bring the total cost of improvements to \$670 million (2015 cost estimate). Construction of the new bridge is set to begin in 2018 and will also include repairs of the bridges over Fort Point Street, Osborne Avenue, and East Avenue; an upgrade of the catenary power system; and an installation of another interlocking that will increase rail line flexibility for operations and safety.