

Shore Line East Then and Now (Electric)

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Introduced in May 1990 as a temporary alternative to construction-induced traffic on I-95, as well as pending construction of the new Q Bridge in New Haven, the Clamdigger commuter rail connecting New Haven and Old Saybrook, soon took on the more forthright—and less seafood restaurant menu item — moniker, Shore Line East (SLE). Following completion of I-95 construction, because of SLE's better-than-expected popularity, the Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT) continued and expanded the service, including:

- 1996 extension to New London;
- 2001 service to Stamford;
- 2002 addition of New Haven's State Street station;
- 2001-2008 rebuilding of stations for accessibility;
- 2007 addition of peak-hour service;
- 2008 addition of weekend service; and

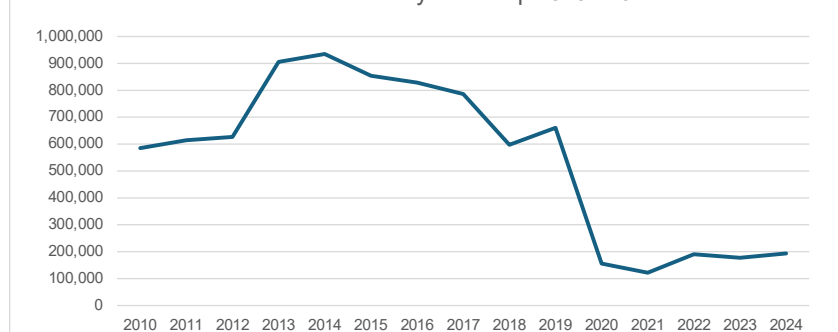
- 2022 addition of second platforms supporting bidirectional service to several stations

Following SLE's peak ridership in 2013-2015 and an uptick in 2019, the coronavirus pandemic brought on declines in public transportation use, particularly for rail and SLE as the first chart below shows. While some of Shore Line East's ridership decline is attributable to the pandemic, an Amtrak maintenance project that caused the replacement of several SLE trains with buses in 2018 and 2019, SLE's limited schedule (with as much as a three-plus hour gap between scheduled trains during peak hours), commuters' hybrid work schedules, and a dearth of parking close to SLE stations also contributed to empty seats on SLE. Service cuts led SLE commuters to worry about a so-called death spiral with service cuts resulting in decreasing ridership that induces cuts that

ultimately threaten SLE's viability. Happily, as the second chart shows, SLE ridership experienced an increase in late 2024, bringing forth the prospect of SLE service restoration to pre-pandemic levels. The return of Shore Line East service also raises the prospect of a virtuous cycle of increasing ridership and restarting talks with Amtrak and Rhode Island officials to extend Shore Line East into Westerly. Capitalizing on New London and Groton's economic expansion could add as many as 160,000 riders to the line without the technical difficulties SLE endured in 2018. The return of pre-pandemic ridership levels to Metro North's New Haven Line raises the prospect of SLE ridership making a full recovery as well.

As Amtrak completed the electrification of its line from New Haven to Boston, Shore Line East service was able to shed its intensely polluting diesel-powered locomotives in favor of the modern M-8 electric-powered rail cars. The electric rail cars' advantages over diesel trains include improved acceleration, modern accommodations (including accessible bathrooms) improved seating, and a smoother ride to make the trip from New Haven to eastern Connecticut more pleasant and faster, thus improving the prospects for increased ridership. Increasing frequency of service would also boost SLE ridership. As noted by Connecticut Public Transportation Council (CPTC) chairman Jim Gildea, since CTDOT added service to Shore Line East in October, the number of passengers is up by over half compared to the previous year (2023). "There is a ridership base begging to come back; the numbers speak for themselves," Gildea said. Commuter rail in eastern Connecticut maintaining its foothold in the transportation infrastructure augurs well for a hopeful future that includes reduced air pollution, fewer traffic crashes, and relaxed commuters showing up for work and returning home refreshed from a relaxing—not to mention often scenic—train ride. ■

Shore Line East Yearly Ridership 2010 - 2024



Shore Line East Yearly Ridership as a Percentage of 2019 Ridership

