


Mansfield

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WHERE THE TRAIN WON'T BE GOING?

Attleboro

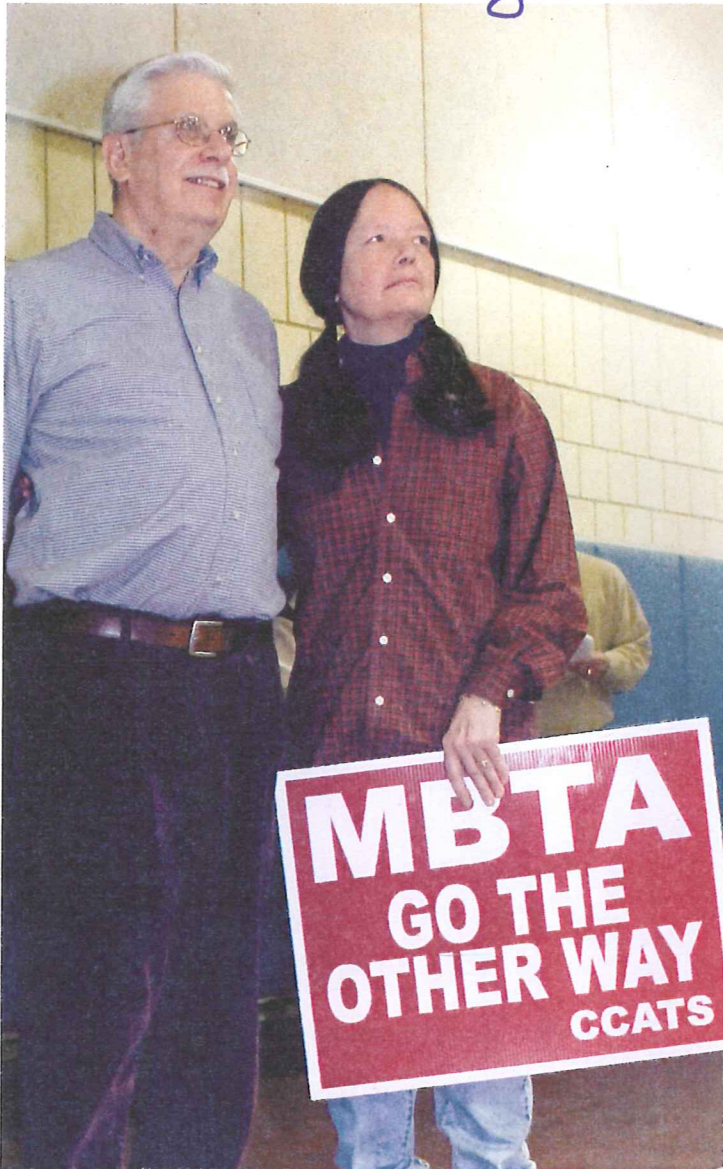
By Corey J. Silva | Photography by Rui Frias

CCATS is back.

Who are they? Citizens Concerned About Tracks. While their mission statement reads that they “support re-establishment of the safe, efficient, and reliable commuter rail service to Southeastern Massachusetts from Boston to the City of Taunton, and the seaport communities of New Bedford and Fall River,” it almost appears that their purpose really is to ensure that one possible route for such a railway—the Attleboro route—is ruled out.

CCATS came together about a decade ago when the state was first planning the South Coast Rail project. Back then, the state proposed five different routes, spending millions upon millions of dollars on logistical and environmental studies to determine the best option. For various reasons, the folks of CCATS argued, and still argue, that the Attleboro route would be a disaster. They instead supported a path through Stoughton.

What’s wrong with the Attleboro route? According to CCATS, everything. They claim that the route would be a logistical nightmare, creating 15 at-grade railway crossings in Taunton with no economic benefits, since Attleboro would be the route’s “gateway” city. They argue that the route would be a nightmare in terms of connecting incompatible existing lines and an environmental disaster due to built pathways through protected wetlands. CCATS contends that



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these and numerous other logistical and environmental problems could be avoided by creating the Stoughton route.

CCATS leader Heather Graph sums up the group's point of view: "There is no reason why a route that is obviously impracticable should be further researched...wasting millions of dollars." As a result, CCATS began attending town meetings and urging local and state officials to join their cause. In 1997, the state concluded that CCATS was right. The Attleboro route was labeled impracticable, and the Stoughton route was deemed the best option.

Case closed, right? Wrong. This is the government we're talking about here. Ten years after these decisions were made, I am sitting in a high school gymnasium in Norton listening to state representatives, local officials, and citizens start the same debate all over again. Not only has nothing been built in the decade since the state

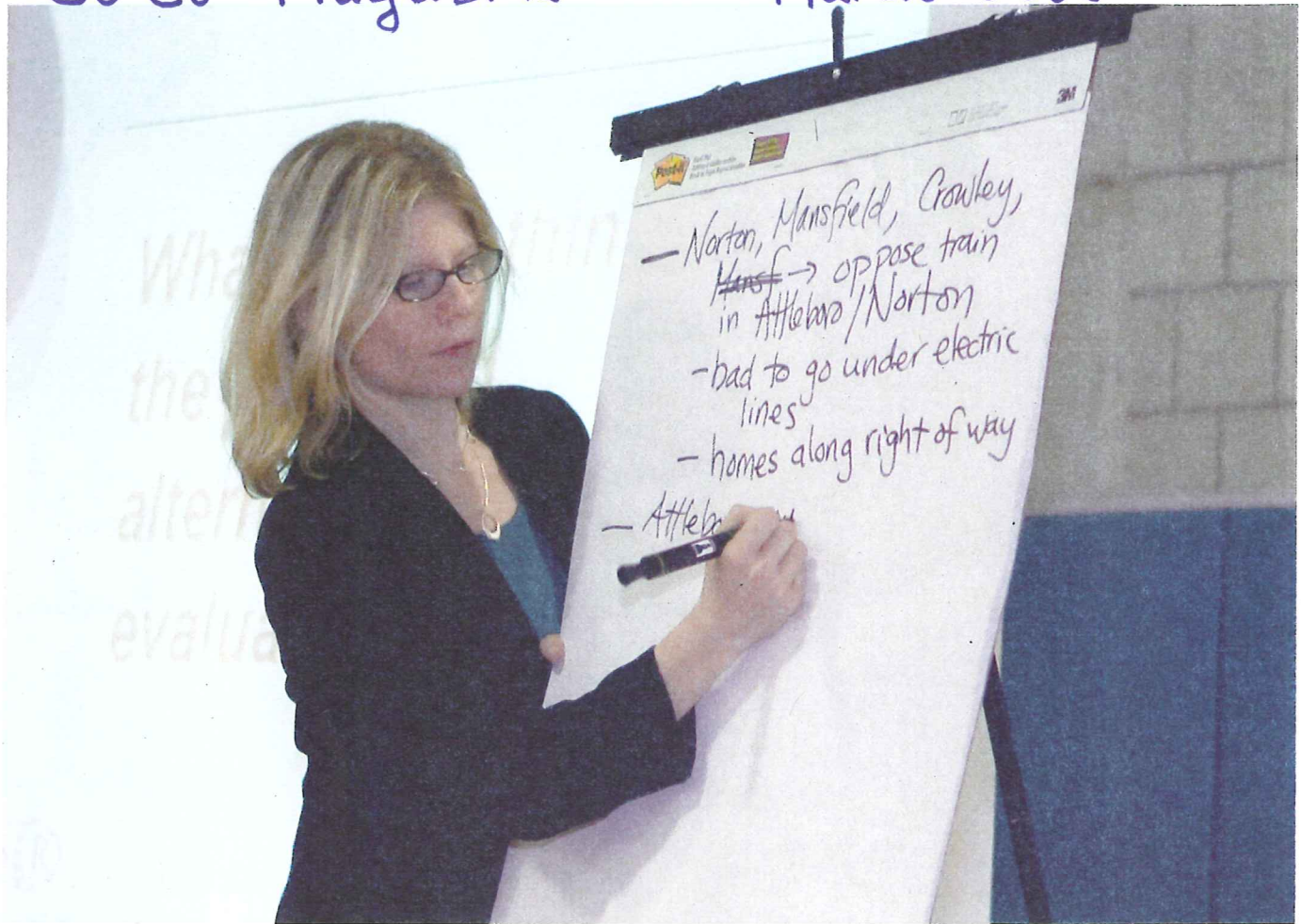
concluded that the Stoughton route was the most viable, they are actually going back to square one to "research all possible routes to bring the commuter rail to the SouthCoast." Only now, instead of the five possible routes originally proposed, the state is now examining the viability of 60 different pathway permutations. *Sixty!*

What happened? No one seems to know for sure. Graph says that the Romney administration, facing a budget deficit, wasn't interested in spending state dollars on the project, and so it was shelved. But Romney took over as governor in 2002—these decisions were made in 1997! Apparently, the administrations that preceded Romney shared his disinterest in the project. The state spent \$17.2 million researching a project, only to leave the reports on a shelf in the state offices to collect dust for the last ten years.

Now that Deval Patrick is hot for the idea of extending railway service to

the SouthCoast, the state has decided to throw out the old research and spend another \$17.2 million to conduct the exact same studies. This time, though, the feds are involved, with 12 federal agencies taking part in the planning of this project. The lead agency is the Army Corp of Engineers, which insists that the research be conducted from scratch and include 60 possible routes. And since environmental impact research has an expiration date—last year, conveniently—those studies must be done again as well.

This meeting is just one in a series being held around the area to inform the citizenry of the state's new plans and to "listen to what you guys have to say, so that you know your voice is being heard," says South Coast Rail Manager Kristina Egan, who was appointed by Patrick to run this vast multimillion-dollar project. She has been sent out into communities for the purpose of keeping residents informed,



and attempt to convince us that the state is considering our viewpoint on the issue.

How is she going about this? Well, she is standing up in front of the great masses with a giant easel and a Magic Marker. The easel has a giant pad of elementary-school-art-class white paper on it. As each citizen walks over to the microphone to voice an opinion, Egan writes furiously with her marker on the giant pieces of paper. Presumably, she is summarizing what each person says. Since they only allow each person one minute to speak, it is of course hard for anyone to make any salient points. Once the paper is full, Egan rips it off the easel and tapes it to the gymnasium wall. As the night goes on, the walls fill up with these papers covered in marker scribble like third-grade art projects.

I have never witnessed such a dog and pony show. Does Egan expect me to believe that, after this meeting is over, she is going to un-tape these sheets of construction paper, put them all in a giant duffel bag, and bring them back to the state offices so that decision-makers can see what the people have to say? Is Deval Patrick, any of his people, or anyone from

the federal agencies involved going to sit around in a boardroom considering her scribbles? Maybe she is going to go home and prepare a bullet-point summary of the peoples' thoughts from her Magic Marker notes and give that to the governor.

CCATS's position on the Attleboro route gained some strength from the fact that all but one person who took the microphone spoke out against it. There were mayors, selectmen, state legislators, business leaders, and plain old citizens in attendance, all of whom were agitated not only by the fact that the Attleboro route was being reconsidered, but that another \$17.2 million of their tax money was going to be spent redoing homework that was done ten years ago.

Graph says that she and CCATS will fight on as long as the state continues to consider the Attleboro route. Just as she felt ten years ago, she will be happy to put down her signs and stop protesting once the route is off the table. We can only hope she won't have to pick them up a third time, ten years from now when a new administration decides to restudy the options for bringing a commuter rail to the SouthCoast. I wouldn't put it past them. ★

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