DON'T LET AMTRAK TEAR UP WOODS, VILLAGES

Late last month, more than 500 enraged citizens crammed into an auditorium in the sleepy hollow of Old Lyme to beat up on bureaucrats from Washington. Led by a gang of national and state senators, representatives, mayors, first selectmen and business leaders, they lambasted the Federal Railroad Administration for proposing a new high-speed rail corridor through southeastern Connecticut and western Rhode Island.

The topic was Amtrak’s Acela Express, our nation's most successful high-speed rail line with a top speed of 150 mph. It runs 457 miles from South Station in Boston to Union Station in Washington, D.C. The southern segment, below New York City's Penn Station, is much faster than the northern segment, with average speeds of 82 and 63 mph respectively.

Clearly, the feds have done something right in producing safe, fast, reliable, comfortable and profitable mass-transit rail service. It's quite splendid. To celebrate that success, they've decided to fix what isn't broken. They want to make it much faster, even though Acela is already out competing air travel for customers, and has put at least one airline out of business.

The feds have three proposals on the table. Their first choice is the most stupid. They want to abandon the present shoreline corridor for a newer, faster one that would leave the present tracks somewhere near Westbrook, run either over or under the Connecticut River, and return to the existing line somewhere near Kingston, R.I.

Between these end points, the existing tracks follow the serrated shore of Long Island Sound, where speeds are limited mainly by the geography of indented estuaries guarded by bedrock ridges and flanked by broad tidal marshes. These were the very features that attracted 17th-century colonists settling the towns of Westbrook, Old Saybrook, Old Lyme, Waterford, New London, Groton, Mystic, Stonington and well into Rhode Island.

This scenic geography requires frequent curves and longer bridges, which slow the train down. So the federal proposal is to create a new corridor north of these limitations. This, however, would destroy the very thing that makes Connecticut so lovely: the charming, historic landscape of villages, woodlands and farms.

The second proposal is to upgrade the track from New Haven to Hartford, and then build a new track to Providence that would use existing rail where possible but would require many new cuts through bucolic towns and woodlands already compromised by forest fragmentation.

The third option is patently absurd: to build a new track from White Plains, N.Y., to Boston parallel to the I-84 corridor.

Take a moment to reflect on the Concorde. Apparently, jet travel wasn't fast enough in the late 1960s, so a consortium of engineers invented a turbo-charged, supersonic passenger aircraft that, on average, saved a few hours travel time for people wealthy enough to buy tickets. This marvel of engineering was retired in 2003 for several reasons, one of which was its high environmental cost associated with noise and heavy fuel consumption.

To my mind, the feds are comparing apples and oranges. The southern segment is mainly an unglaciated coastal plain, where flat, straight, easy-to-excavate reaches are plentiful, meaning trains can go faster. The northern segment of the New England shore is an ancient, uplifted, glacially
incised bedrock landscape now flooded by the sea. It's greater beauty may limit high-speed rail, but so be it. We should not let one geological province dictate the terms for another.

If higher speeds are true needs, then let's get them by raising the existing track above coastal storm surges, give the train more lean on curves, upgrade derelict bridges, reduce the number of stops, and increase the accelerations. The last thing we need is to ruin more landscape in the pursuit of technological excellence.