

RAILGRAM

NJ Transit Rail Celebrates 40th Anniversary

By **DAVID PETER ALAN**

It has now been slightly more than 40 years since NJ Transit started running its trains under its own flag. While the different lines were originally operated by historical railroads, such as the Morris & Essex (M&E), Gladstone, and Montclair lines by the Lackawanna Railroad until 1960, the statewide system was run by the Consolidated Rail Corp. (Conrail), with help from the Commuter Operating Agency (COA) at the New Jersey Department of Transportation.

According to Coalition member Jim Blaze, who worked as a manager for Conrail at the time, Congress mandated in 1981 that Conrail had to give up its local passenger operations by the end of 1982. In a hurry, and just in time for New Years' Day 1983, 3 regional railroads were born: Metro-North in New York State, NJ Transit Rail, and SEPTA Regional Rail in the Philadelphia area.

Service on several lines was discontinued during the Conrail period, and the Atlantic City Rail Line and service beyond High Bridge to Philipsburg on the Raritan Line ended in 1983 under NJT. The former returned to service in 1990; the latter never did. There have not been any new lines built since NJ Transit took over rail operations, but some Morris & Essex and Montclair-Boonton Line trains now go beyond Netcong to Hackettstown, and there are more trains to Port Jervis and High Bridge than there were 40 years ago. Limited weekend service to Montclair came back in 2010 and, in 2007, service outside peak-commuting hours returned to the Pascack Valley Line for the first time since 1939.

There were 3 important events on lines of Lackawanna heritage during the NJT period. The modernization of the electrical system on the M&E and the Montclair and Gladstone Branches was started under Conrail, and completed in 1984. The Montclair Connection, which was first proposed in 1929, opened for service in 2002. Midtown Direct service on the M&E and Montclair lines directly to New York's Penn Station began in June 1996. Prior to that time, Hoboken was the eastern terminal for all trains, and there is still Hoboken service today.

In addition, NJ Transit integrated the fare structure and operations of the predecessor railroads, which had not changed much during the Conrail era, into a more-unified system over time. There was a trauma during the early days in 1983, too. There were strikes against all 3 of the new railroads starting in March, and the NJ Transit rail strike lasted for 34 days. Transit managers chartered buses and ran special service during peak-commuting hours, much as they did in 2012, after Hurricane Sandy devastated the area, including local transit.

Through the years, NJ Transit has kept the railroad going, and has increased service on some of the lines that still run today. There is more to be done, concerning such issues as levels of service and scheduling connectivity between lines for riders making linked trips. Still, the Lackawanna Coalition salutes NJ Transit Rail on 40 years of keeping the trains going. That, in itself, is something to celebrate.

Coalition Calls for Hourly Weekend Service for Montclair and Hoboken

By **DAVID PETER ALAN**

At its November meeting, the Lackawanna Coalition passed a resolution calling on NJ Transit to start running hourly service between Montclair and Hoboken on Saturdays and Sundays, no later than the beginning of the next fiscal year this coming July 1.

The principal "Resolved" clause says: "the Lackawanna Coalition calls for New Jersey Transit to implement hourly weekend passenger-rail service between Hoboken and Montclair State University stations, scheduled for connections with Morris & Essex Line trains at Broad Street Station in Newark, as the trains that run on the current schedule are scheduled for such connections. . ."

The last time Montclair trains ran every hour on weekends was in 1959, under the historic Lackawanna Railroad. Limited Saturday service ran until 1966, but there were no weekend trains again until 2010. At that time, service was restored every 2 hours, with some 3-hour gaps in the evening. Under the current schedule, trains between Bay Street Station and Hoboken connect with M&E trains between New York Penn Station and Dover for a cross-platform connection at Broad Street Station in Newark. There is no weekend service between Bay Street (at the east end of Montclair) and Montclair State, or beyond there to Denville; the latter segment is served only during weekday "commuter hours."

In its resolution, the Coalition noted that trains run hourly on weekends on most NJT lines, and complained that "[t]he present level of weekend service on the Montclair-Boonton Line falls below the standard of service for most other lines in the system, thereby depriving residents of the area served by that line of as-frequent access to other places served by New Jersey Transit as is accorded on other such lines." At the present time, ridership is closer to pre-COVID levels on weekends than on weekdays.

The Coalition also called on NJ Transit to implement service west of Montclair State, to Denville and Dover on weekdays, at times other than peak-commuting hours, and on weekends. We are aware of the Farmers' Market at the Walnut Street station on Saturdays, but there are many weekend hours at which train service for those farther west could be accommodated, and certainly off-peak weekday service has no such conflict.

Officer Elections Held at December Meeting

At its Dec. 19th meeting, held a week early because of the Christmas holiday on Monday, Dec. 26th, the Lackawanna Coalition elected officers for 2023. The slate of officers was accepted by acclamation: Chairperson, Sally Jane Gellert, Woodcliff Lake (Pascack Valley line); Vice Chairperson, Robert Hingel, Short Hills (Morris & Essex line); Treasurer, Brad Payeur, Gillette (Gladstone Branch); Secretary, Daniel Chazin, Teaneck (Pascack Valley line); Legislative Director, Vito Havrilla, Bloomfield (Montclair-Boonton line), Technical Director, David Anderson, Newark (multiple lines). The speaker for the evening was Chairperson Emeritus David Peter Alan with a presentation on the early years of NJ Transit Rail. We thank member Elaine Becker for her traditional hospitality. *(Newsletter continues on reverse)*

HELP MAKE A DIFFERENCE! Come to a Lackawanna Coalition meeting!

Fourth Monday of the month (except holidays), 6:45 p.m., always by phone, now again in person in Millburn. Next meetings: Jan. 23 and Feb. 28. info@lackawannacoalition.org

Officers Elected *(continued from reverse)*

Lackawanna Coalition membership is open to all interested in rail service, with the group's focus primarily on NJ Transit's Morris & Essex line. The Coalition was started in April 1979, a few months before NJ Transit itself was formed, by Millburn commuters concerned with the quality of their rail service. We still meet in Millburn Town Hall. Membership in the Coalition is open to Counties (\$250), Communities (\$150), and Individuals (\$15). Meetings are accessible online through Maestro Conference (phone) or Jitsi (video). For information, e-mail info@lackawannacoalition.org.

Report from the Chair

By **SALLY JANE GELLERT**, Chairperson

A new year starts this month: my 3rd as Lackawanna Coalition chairperson, and NJ Transit Rail's 41st. The Coalition has a new Website, the forum is back in operation, and we are looking forward to being the advocate host of the Rail Users' Network's in-person conference in the spring. Our resolution supporting the expansion of weekend service on the Montclair-Boonton line caught the attention of Board Member James Adams, who asked Kevin Corbett to look into the possibilities and interest of local communities. We continue to look for more transparency from NJ Transit, something for which we have advocated for years, if not decades.

The lack of a so-called Customer Advocate has become almost absurd; every meeting, there are at least a few members of the public asking about it, yet no progress—possibly because they have written a job description impossible to fill. How about just expanding telephone support hours? 6 a.m. to midnight would be great; we'd settle for a 10 p.m. closing, instead of the current 5 p.m.—actually earlier, as I have had the switchboard shut off at 4:50 when I was holding. Wouldn't you expect that operators would answer the questions of those on hold before leaving? We all like to leave our office on time, but providing the best customer service means giving just a little extra. However, that should only rarely be a consideration: one would expect that shift schedules would allow workers to answer all waiting calls and still clock out on time.

Essex2045 Plan Moves Forward

By **SALLY JANE GELLERT**

On December 15th, I attended a virtual meeting of a Stakeholder Advisory Committee on the Essex2045 plan for the next 20 years of transportation in Essex County. In a study funded by the North Jersey Transportation Planning Association, Mercer Planning Associates, the consultants running the program, had conducted surveys and hosted 2 pop-up kiosks and participated in 2 safety fairs with University Hospital. The events were held in October and early November in Orange, West Orange, Irvington, and Newark. In West Orange and Irvington, a complex intersection was chosen and a demo "parklet" was outlined as a feature to gauge the reactions of passers-by. Study personnel were on the scene to explain the project and gather reactions on sticky notes. Overall, those reactions were positive, with more than half wanting to keep the demonstration projects installed permanently. Many people were pleased to see attention paid to underserved locations, emphasizing the need to make interventions in these areas a priority.

Results Compiled

The slide presentation included results of the online survey, in which respondents were asked to "put a pin in" their home, work, and other locations (a total of 1,836 locations were pinned). Questions were also asked about current practices and interests, about what is on people's minds as they plan for the future. Currently, respondents mostly drive alone (39.2%), but the number preferring to do that in the future is substantially lower: 19.8%. Relatively few people currently take transit

(12.3%); that number increases to 15.8% in the future—and I suspect that with increased frequency and liability, as well as a door-to-door solution, that number would increase further. In fact, there were almost equal calls for new transit (23.2%) and more frequent transit (22.9%). There is interest in biking in the future (1.7% current; 7.4% future interest), and electric vehicles have appeal, with almost 10% of respondents interested in their use in the future, though less than 2% use electric vehicles currently.

Pedestrian safety is a big concern of Essex County residents, with vehicles failing to stop or yield and excessive speeding each cited as concerns by 22.8% of respondents. Almost twice as many (41.4%) called for bike lanes. After the presentation, the group discussion included emphasis on how these could be addressed; the general public often thinks only of enforcement, but planners have other tools: "traffic calming" includes means to naturally encourage lower speeds, such as roundabouts, bumped-out curbs at intersections, and speed bumps.

Ampere Station

One of the concrete suggestions for which the Lackawanna Coalition has advocated in the past, and will consider a resolution to support, is the reopening of the Ampere Station on the Montclair-Boonton line in East Orange. The station was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Operating Passenger Railroad Stations Thematic Resource, a list of 53 New Jersey Transit stations entered into the New Jersey Register of Historic Places and National Register of Historic Places in 1984 for their architectural, historical, and cultural merit. However, service to Ampere Station was discontinued in 1991, and after deterioration and a fire, the station building was demolished in 1995. A decade later, in 2005, East Orange considered rebuilding and reopening the station. A study at that time suggested applying for Department of Transportation transit-village funds. We would like to see service restored to this community.

Lackawanna Coalition

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Chair Emeritus

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Breaking News:

On Saturday, Jan. 7th, a Transportation Camp unconference was held. Watch our website for a report.

Also, a calendar note: Feb. 4th is Transit Equity Day. Noon livestream at <https://www.labor4sustainability.org/transit-equity-2023>

Coming Attractions for Meeting Presentations

We have a great line-up of presentations for you at our upcoming meetings!

This month, Lackawanna Coalition Secretary Daniel Chazin taking us with him on some of his recent rail excursions, as a rail fan and hiker. February and March are Budget Season in Trenton, so at our February meeting, our legislative director, Vito Havrilla, will update us on the state budget and how it might affect our transit agency. March will bring us a virtual visit from Henry Posner, chairman of Railroad Development Corp. (RDC), who will discuss some thoughts on the Princeton Dinky study that was recently completed.