

Freight Trains in Dover and the M&E

by Chris Neidenberg

10 June 2020

By Chris Neidenberg

One thing seemed clear from the May 28 “virtual” presentation on North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority’s (NJTPA’s) Dover & Rockaway River Railroad (D&RR) Realignment Study: while the authority feels its on the right track to eliminate 10 ungated at-grade crossings in downtown Dover, much uncertainty awaits its final destination.

Now, it’s a matter that will require project overseers to get “all aboard” in support of the conditional plan they say will safely speed up freight shipments to five D&RR customers by creating a new switching junction for the county-owned short line, along a small portion of New Jersey Transit’s (NJT’s) Morristown (Morris & Essex) line, during a regulatory process they cautioned could extend indefinitely. If the option is built, Morris County plans to try luring even additional customers to the spur, as an economic development initiative.

About 25 people registered on the study’s website to hear Scott Parker, project manager for the authority’s engineering consultant, Jacobs, outline a study with NJTPA project manager Jakub Rowinski. They took questions online and via phone during a 90-minute event. Additionally, citizens have an opportunity to send public comments to the agency during a 30-day period expiring June 28. A traditional in-person meeting was first set for Dover on March 17, but was canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic. The study identified eight basic alternatives in the general region to relocate the D&RR junction from an area west of Dover station, near the Rockaway River, to a spot further east under Route 46. It would touch a small part of the McWilliams Forge company site in Rockaway Borough—if the county can reach agreement with its owners.

The D&RR is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Chesapeake and Delaware LLC. It operates along a six-mile route spanning seven municipalities before terminating to the north near Route 80 in Wharton. The selection was made using a relative scoring system for each of 14 criteria, ranging from 5 (“Highly Beneficial”) to –100 (“Fatally Flawed”), with the winning site receiving the best net score. Criteria evaluated included impact on wetlands, historic 100- and 500-year flood plains, state and federal endangered species, contaminated sites, historic areas, NJT’s own operations, and community benefits/drawbacks. The scoring system showed the selected site near Route 46 still faces a significant challenge, receiving a total score of only 3 (the worst site scored at –108). The analysis assigned low negative numbers (generally –1) relative to its impact on areas such as proximity to contamination, impact to NJT, and wetlands.

Parker explained that many of the environmentally-based criteria (wetlands, flooding, pollution, endangered species threats) posed so many negatives in the region close to the Rockaway River that it makes keeping a new junction in the same general region highly problematic, assuring that the selected option, much further east, is the best choice. Yet he acknowledged that relocating there would place it in a far more congested area, at least in terms of rail traffic, with a potential substantial impact on NJT’s commuter rail operations. Even so, Parker explained the NJTPA’s preferred remedy will eliminate the need for the antiquated system of having freight-rail flagmen jump off the trains at the 10 current crossings targeted for elimination, to direct pedestrian and vehicular traffic, thus significantly enhancing safety. However, the plan notes that this practice will continue for all the sites in Rockaway Borough, and three others in Dover, to keep serving an existing business (DonJon Recycling) as mandated under federal law.

Additionally, if the selection passes muster, the county will need to negotiate terms with NJT in areas such as setting up a construction schedule and how commuter trains sharing this part of the Morristown line might be impacted.

Getting to the last stop could take a very long time, the Jacobs engineer conceded. “There really isn’t a definitive timeline yet,” Parker told retired conductor and state rail historian Mike Del Vecchio of Dover. “But we’re going through the steps and sequences of what really needs to happen next.”

"In an ideal universe, where everything went perfectly, you're a minimum of four years out for this project to be completed," Parker added. "Realistically, you're probably talking closer to six— just the way the world functions." When the study is completed, he said, numerous other steps must follow, starting with "a preliminary and final design," then "all the environmental permitting," followed by finding sources, such as grants, for the massive amount of "funding to do the [design and construction] contracts, and the actual contractors to construct."

Parker acknowledged to Todd Hirt, state Department of Transportation (NJDOT) supervising engineer, who is working with NJT to assure the new junction meets the rail agency's design and performance standards, that he could not provide any cost estimates on the alternatives. He told Hirt that the process emphasized finding the best site over costs, and that had there been "substantial" cost differences among the alternatives, they would have been detailed in the study. Hirt also asked Parker if the NJTPA considered the costs of simply signaling/gating the 10 impacted crossings. Parker replied it did, but that he did not have that information with him. However, he assured Hirt that NJTPA "is in the process of" finalizing a cost estimate for the preferred option in progressing to the next steps.

Other benefits that supporters say will accrue from the NJTPA's pick include better unifying the northern and southern sections of Dover by eliminating the tracks dividing them, in meeting town planning/zoning objectives, and rejuvenating downtown businesses—such as restaurants and retail shops—by eliminating noise and other environmental concerns that the passing trains now pose by the time life returns to normal.

Morris County Freeholder Kathryn DeFillippo, NJTPA chairwoman, claimed that, in a scene more reminiscent of an earlier time in railroading, using train flagmen to stop pedestrians and vehicles in the region is hazardous, given the "stop/go" nature of the moving trains and with so many ungated crossings so close to each other. The study insists that this poses particular problems for a congested area such as downtown Dover. The study also maintained that a lack of rail traffic on the short line can cause drivers to be inattentive to oncoming trains and indecisive upon approaching the tracks.

"It takes a very long time to get through a very short area." DeFillippo told the online audience, urging the situation be rectified because, "These rail lines play a vital role in our county and their safe and efficient operation is our top priority." Del Vecchio urged the NJTPA to seriously ponder all the impacts the new switching junction will create, keying in on NJT, though he said he supports the alternative selected. "Right now, they (freight trains) get on and off of that line west of Dover station where there's not a lot of traffic," he explained, "The new connections will be east of Dover amongst all these commuter trains . . . so there will be a lot more trains coming."

"There will definitely be constrictions," Parker responded. "Like everything else in life, it's a matter of finding a balance."

Del Vecchio, a retired conductor with the Morristown and Erie Railway, insisted the proposal represents progress. "As a history buff, I'll be sad to see it go," he said. "But realistically, I understand time marches on and I understand that it is time to do this." And even as he tried prying cost estimates out of the authority, Hirt assured Parker, "I am in favor of eliminating the crossings. I was just asking about the costs."

In a later e-mail, Paul Wyckoff, NJT's chief of government and external affairs, assured the Lackawanna Coalition that his agency will be vigorously involved in the discussions regarding potential impacts on commuter train traffic and other issues potentially affecting the agency, as it has done previously. "Certainly, NJT is always involved in discussions with freight operators who use our tracks, and vice-versa," he wrote, noting that NJDOT is helping his agency assure "that NJT engineering standards would be part of any design work that gets performed in the study," using information submitted by NJT staff. Wyckoff stated that typically such discussions occur between NJT and the affected freight carriers, not the carrier's clients. He explained that since two freight rail operators, Chesapeake & Delaware Railroad LLC and Morristown & Erie Railway, enjoy legal "operating rights in this territory" as third parties under trackage agreements, NJT must work to try accommodating them.

The Lackawanna Coalition encourages all Dover residents, as well as Morris & Essex riders, to check out the details and make comments before the close of the public-comment period on June 28. More details here: <http://doverrailstudy.org/get-involved/>; e-mail comments tojrowinski@njtpa.org or scott.parker@jacobs.com.

Chris Neidenberg is an experienced print journalist with roughly 25 years experience covering municipalities and school boards in Bergen, Passaic, Hudson, and Union counties. He received his BA in Communication from Seton Hall University.