

RAILGRAM

Is NJT Jumping the Gun with Full Pre-COVID Weekday Service?

Commentary By **DAVID PETER ALAN**

As quickly as they disappeared in March, NJ Transit's full commuter-oriented weekday schedules came back on July 6. There were not many commuters on the trains, and ridership did not increase much from the level of late June and early July. Other transit providers around the nation are ramping-up weekday service gradually, to serve the remaining commuters as they return to the rails. That may have been a better approach for NJT, for a number of reasons.

Since the virus hit, many office workers have been working "remotely" from home, or only coming into the office on certain days. It stands to reason that at least some of them will continue to do so, which means less need for seats on trains at peak-commuting hours. We do not know how much the demand for such seats will diminish, but it will certainly decrease to some extent. At least some of the commuter-oriented capacity that ran until March 20 is now unnecessary, and may stay that way. It appears highly likely that the Gateway Program, which would have cost in excess of \$30 billion for infrastructure that was never needed outside peak-commuting hours, will not be needed in the future. Repairs to the tunnels and a third track directly to Penn Station will be needed, but not the entire program. The former is happening and the latter is feasible for much less money, but there will not be enough money available to build the entire Gateway Program. It really IS time to rethink all of this.

NJT is behind schedule in its efforts to meet the year-end deadline for installing and testing the Positive Train Control (PTC) system required by Congress and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). With fewer trains running, NJT would have had more access to the tracks for PTC testing and other projects that keep the rail lines in a state of good repair.

Nobody is saying that the remaining commuters should not be given enough capacity to get them to their offices, but it appears that a significant fraction of them will no longer ride every day at the historically-busiest time. In 2006, NJT Executive Director George D. Warrington called riders on trains outside peak-commuting hours "incidental." NJT's attitude does not seem to have changed much since that time, but everything else is changing. Transit everywhere, including NJT, needs to change, too. Thinking about new service patterns to fit the times would be a good start.

The "Temporary Schedule" Included Some Service Improvements That Are Worth Keeping

By **DAVID PETER ALAN**

For 15 weeks, NJT's weekday rail service looked more like the weekend schedule, with a few enhancements here and there. Some places like the Montclair-Boonton Line fared poorly, despite our objections, while other places had the best weekday service ever.

The Morris & Essex Line to Dover was one of the beneficiaries. For the first time in history, weekday trains during peak-commuting hours stopped at Secaucus; a benefit that was never available to that line's riders since that station opened in 2004. For the first time since 2015, the last weekday train left New York at 1:19 a.m.; 23 minutes later than the current schedule. Riders on the Pascack Valley Line had their curfew temporarily extended by 90 minutes; on the North Jersey Coast Line south of Long Branch, they got an extra 102 minutes!

Gladstone Branch riders got the best weekday service ever. They enjoyed hourly service throughout the day; no more annoying four-hour gap going inbound in the late afternoon and evening. Better yet, the two commuter-hour trains from New York ran, too. That proved that NJT can provide a reasonable commuter service on the "Branch" and all-day hourly trains, with no new infrastructure! The proposed Lyons Siding would make service even better, but the schedule could again be the best ever, even without it. The Pascack Valley Line customarily has a similar five-hour gap in the late afternoon and evening, while Port Jervis trains have a gap of eight hours. For 15 weeks, those gaps were gone! Service ran through the day, to the benefit of the riders.

On the light-rail side, service between Penn Station and Broad Street Station on the Newark Light Rail ran every 20 minutes on weekdays; rather than every 30 outside peak-commuting hours. That was a major enhancement, which improved rail riders' chances of making train connections.

So, while there were sacrifices, the COVID-19 schedule had some benefits, too. We plan to talk with appropriate managers about restoring them.

Report From The Chair

By **DAVID PETER ALAN**, Chair

The service cuts that came in the wake of the COVID-19 virus are over. NJ Transit reduced rail service on March 23 and restored it to the pre-COVID weekday service level on July 6. Did they jump the gun by running unnecessary service when there are not enough riders to support it fully? Did they eliminate useful features in the "temporary" schedules that actually improved service, and which riders could have used to advantage when more businesses and facilities re-open? We will explore those issues elsewhere but, for the most part, NJ Transit Rail did well during the period of reduced service.

The level of service was essentially weekend service on the rail and light-rail lines. That was enough in many places. Ridership had plummeted in March to about 5% of pre-COVID level, and had recovered to about 20% by the Fourth of July. Most lines ran hourly service, which was the same as mid-day and evening service on those lines. The Gladstone Branch had better weekday service than ever, but some lines suffered. There were trains between Hoboken and Bay Street, Montclair only every two hours, and only a few peak-hour trains west of Bay Street on the Montclair-Boonton Line. The Bergen County Line ran only every two hours, as well, so the overall service was a mixed bag.

(Article continues on reverse)

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Fourth Monday of the month (except holidays), 6:45 p.m., by phone until further notice. Next meetings: July 27 and August 24.

Report From The Chair *(Continued from reverse side)*

One aspect of service where the crews deserve credit was about wearing masks; an action repeatedly touted by health authorities as one of the most cost-effective ways to keep the virus from spreading. Crew members and bus drivers were diligent about wearing masks, and they were strict about making passengers wear them, too. On one train I rode, a passenger kept his mask in his pocket and refused to wear it in the proper place. The crew put him off the train. However unpleasant the mask may feel, the disease is much worse, and everybody around NJT seemed to understand that.

There was one problem that persisted, and will persist into the future. Even though most of the trains that normally ran during peak-commuting hours had been suspended, the system was still plagued by cancellations, despite the reduced service level. If there are not enough crew members or equipment to run reduced service, it is difficult to fathom that there could be enough to run the full complement of weekday service from the past.

NJT's performance during the past few months could have been better, but it certainly could have been worse. We had weekend-level service, with all of its poor connections, but we had basic mobility. Many transit riders in other places did not even have that.

"Empire Station" Should Be About Transit, Not Just Real Estate Development

Commentary By **SALLY JANE GELLERT**

Traveling to New York by rail from New Jersey means going through Penn Station: crowded, old, tired; and now missing the schedule board that had a distinctive sound as train departures were updated. We have heard of plans for renovation, have seen progress on the Moynihan and Farley projects, and heard rumbles about "Penn South" proposals. Well, it is becoming more than rumors, yet many questions remain unanswered.

On Friday, July 17, Vornado (a real estate company that owns much of the property in the Penn Station area) held a briefing on the "Empire Station" project. A "scoping hearing" on the subject was held on Monday, July 20. On Friday, the project was characterized as a means of raising funds for the public-transit portion. Questions about engineering, track alignment, through-running regional trains were dismissed as being handled by engineers – in effect, "not our job"!

This means trouble. Vornado is a huge real estate company, landlord to many shopping malls, office buildings, etc. Their briefing focused exclusively above ground, on their concept of "improving the neighborhood" as an "entrance to New York City" and on improving walkability by widening sidewalks. Skyscrapers would replace existing buildings (acquired through purchase or eminent domain) because Vornado management believes "it is not a matter of 'if,' but a matter of when" they will be desired. Meanwhile, the Neiman-Marcus store that anchored the new West Side Yards mall is closing. The project was described as a means of raising funds for the transit improvements.

"Empire Station Complex" appears to be well named. Imperial settlers seem to be defining the future of a neighborhood whose residents and business owners may not even "know" or believe that it "needs" improvement. The interests of longstanding businesses and long-term residents, not those of some future hypothetical visitors, should be considered most important. Public interests, including efficient regional transportation, fiscal responsibility in spending tax dollars and giving tax credits, and historic preservation (the destruction of the original Penn Station in 1963 sparked historic preservation throughout the country) should drive any renovation plan. However, Vornado seems to focus on

a vast increase in office and residential space, obtainable only through major zoning changes, and which may not even be necessary or desirable in a post-COVID New York.

This project is a case of the tail wagging the dog. Penn Station travelers want basic service improvements: better signage; earlier announcements of train departure gates; tickets for all lines throughout the entire station; connection to Grand Central so that travelers to the East Side need not disembark in Penn Station and walk or use NYC transit to get to the East Side; allowing trains to clear platforms faster and thus increasing capacity.

We are appalled that NJ Transit has given its approval to this project. They should fight for New Jersey passengers to have full access to Moynihan, and not diverted a block further south. They should fight for full participation in managing the station. They should fight for US, their riders!

Is NJ Transit Running Subpar Service to Promote Portal North Bridge Service?

Commentary By **DAVID PETER ALAN**

As the COVID-19 virus hit the nation last spring, transit providers reduced service. In some places, the cuts were drastic. As the New York area and other places reopen, the trains are slowly coming back, as they are needed. NJ Transit was the exception, returning to the pre-COVID level of weekday service on July 6, even though the former commuters have not returned in large numbers, and some unprecedented weekday service enhancements were lost in the process.

On Wednesday, July 22, *Railway Age* posted this writer's article: *Rail "Commuting" in the "New Normal."* Not everybody who commuted five days a week during "peak-hours" before will continue to do so during the coming post-COVID times. That means the proposed Portal North Bridge and other Gateway Program infrastructure WILL NOT BE NEEDED for the remaining commuters. NJ Transit used misleading numbers to advance the case for an FTA Core Capacity grant, which requires that the segment of the line at issue must be at 95% of capacity, and the project would improve capacity by 10% or more. That will not occur with fewer peak-hour commuters going into Penn Station.

Times have changed. If NJT and transit generally are to remain viable, they must change with the times and look at themselves as providing mobility; rather than concentrating on commuters. To waste scarce dollars on infrastructure that is no-longer needed will not help accomplish that objective.

Railgram

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Coming Attractions for Meeting Presentations

We have been meeting by phone since March at our regular time, 6:45 pm, but Millburn Town Hall is beginning to reopen. Starting on August 24, we hope to return there, with live, on-line and phone participation. We are working surmounting the technical challenges that such a format presents, but we will be coming back. Our presenter on July 27 will be transportation economist Jim Blaze, who is developing a customer-centered model for transit. For August 24, we have invited Scott Spencer of AmeriStarRail, who has a plan for improving operations on Amtrak's Northeast Corridor (NEC). To learn more about our presenters at future meetings, please check the "General" or "Members" portions of our website, www.lackwannacoalition.org.