

# NJ Transit Board Meeting

## Lackawanna Coalition Statement

21 October 2020

Lackawanna  
Coalition

### Open Our Stations!

“Winter is coming, the geese are getting fat”—and though we are not concerned about the geese, as our weather gets colder, passengers are looking for indoor seating and restrooms as they wait for their trains and buses. Buses are growing more crowded, often bus-stop benches as well. Meanwhile, rail ridership is still quite low, yet rail stations without ticket agents are locked, and those stations with agents have restrooms open during ticket-agent hours only and benches are always blocked off. The one exception of which we are aware is a station that includes a restaurant for which benches serve as diners’ seating. With these benches open, passengers are able to evaluate crowding and safety and sit or stand, or go outdoors, accordingly. The rest of us deserve similar courtesy. Riders with mobility issues, with young children, or simply in quick need of a restroom are particularly inconvenienced by this, and if the situation does not change in cold weather, those who have the option of driving will be discouraged from using the trains, taking their potential fares with them.

### 80x50—Transportation Is Critical

According to the NJ Department of Environmental Protection’s report on progress toward Global Warming Response Act goals, 42% of the state’s greenhouse-gas emissions are from the transportation sector—mostly cars and trucks. One of the DEP’s 5 pathways to reduced emissions in this sector is increasing ridership on buses and trains, with an aspirational goal of a 200% increase over the next decade, and a “low” and “high” goal of 13.5 and 28%, respectively. What is NJ Transit planning to encourage such increased ridership? The report has a strong focus on electric vehicles, but says nothing about electrifying our trains. Our namesake, the Lackawanna Railroad, as well as the Pennsylvania Railroad, were visionary enough >100 years ago to electrify their lines, but the former Erie lines have not been electrified: Raritan, Long Branch, and Montclair-Boonton from Montclair State to Denville. Electrification would improve emissions while allowing all equipment to be used on any line—which could only reduce the cancellation rates, at least those attributable to equipment availability—improving rail resiliency and air alike.

### NJ Transit Microgrid: Bravo! (maybe)

It is a pleasure to congratulate you for meeting with my fellow advocates. We are pleased to see plans for a project that can be an asset in our state’s push to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We know that the problem during Superstorm Sandy was distribution, not generation; we hope that you take that resiliency factor into account moving forward. We are most interested in your Oct. 28 meeting (we hope that it is open to the public, as all of us could be educated). The action item as written appears to cover a central power plant (again, for resiliency, it’s distribution, not generation!), and the statement by your spokesperson Jim Smith does not really elucidate the situation: “NJ TRANSIT is committed to an approach that maximizes the use of renewable energy sources, consistent with Governor Phil Murphy’s Energy Master Plan.”<sup>1</sup> We would like to see these federal resiliency funds used to build a Portal North bridge to match the planned Portal South bridge—no capacity-grant requirements—and the EDA funds released.

### Budget

Looking just at your expected fiscal year 2021 fare-box recovery rate of 14%, or 1/3 of fiscal 2019’s 42% and about 1/2 of fiscal 2020’s 31%, we would expect to see a decreased budget this year and that we would be asking how you would continue to provide service and even restore the lost trains that were expected back in early 2019 (no, we do not forget!). However, in what seems to be incredible optimism or a disconnect with reality, your fiscal 2021 budget is actually increased from both the pandemic-free fiscal 2019 budget and the fiscal 2020 amount. Even the preliminary fiscal 2020 budget, arguably the hardest hit by the pandemic, is increased from 2019, and lower than your expectations for 2021. This is contrary to common sense: everyone else is talking about reductions in spending, about how to make ends meet, when economic activity—for NJ Transit, that means ridership—is so reduced.

(con’t.)

## Lackawanna Coalition Statement (con't.)

The logo for the Lackawanna Coalition, featuring the words "Lackawanna" and "Coalition" stacked vertically in a white serif font, enclosed within a red square border.

Since April, you have revised income downward by \$851 million, plugging the gap (plus!) with federal CARES Act funding of \$911.3 million, ~90% of the remaining amount, and adding some state funding. We note that your budget document points out that fiscal 2021 is the last year of the contract with the NJ Turnpike Authority, and we ask for legal documentation of the promises made by commissioner.

We understand that the recent NJTransit reform legislation calls for not only a current-year estimate and a budget projection for the upcoming year, but also preliminary projections for the following year—in this case, 2022. Where is that projection? What happens if 90% of the CARES Act money is spent this year, recovery is not as quick as we all hope, and there is not another round of federal dollars? What if, in addition, ridership does not return and the state funds are again needed elsewhere—this year saw a 35% cut in state subsidies (huge compared to cuts in other state agencies' budgets), will you expect riders to provide that amount from fares? How much per rider would that be? (By the way, other agencies are looking at new fare structures, including volume discounts based on other than 30-day passes priced under the assumption of 5 weekly round trips [e.g., 3 trips weekly, 10 round trips per month]—are you planning anything similar, and how would that potentially affect your income?) I am not trying to be gloomy, but not testing possibilities can lead to a sudden approach to a cliff edge, as happened at the end of the Corzine administration, which gave us a drastic fare increase in the Christie administration. We are looking to avoid such surprises. We were pleased to hear board members at the recent Administration Committee meeting express their concern about not seeing a budget in advance—and no, the answer of “you saw it before” did not work for them, any more than it does for us—and we and they deserve better. Table this budget, take it back to the drawing board, and come back next month with details of train restorations, innovative fare plans to reflect new commuting patterns, and a projection to avoid a 2022 shock.

### Web Site

When asked about station opening, to date the only information that NJ Transit staff provides is a vague statement about not opening “until it can be done safely”, and a link to an obscure Web page with little information.<sup>2</sup> The URL to that page is search-engine deficient—nothing that the average rider could find. Once there, one finds a general statement including a link to station information. Judging by the first station alphabetically, Aberdeen Matawan, these pages need serious help. First, why are you using software that does not recognize ZIP codes starting with zeroes—which all N.J. ZIP codes do? Second, the car-centric nature of our public transportation agency comes through loud and clear. The layout is clearly designed for motorists (illustration on next page):

- a hard-to-read very small map emphasizing parking lots (and not oriented as most U.S. maps, with North at the top),
- parking lot information at the top of the page, station hours at the bottom,
- no information for pedestrians,
- minimal information for bikers, and
- rail-line information and alerts ostensibly below the map—but, given the modular nature of the design and the extensive parking information, quite far down the page.

I see that your on-time data page has been upgraded to show each rail line's data in graphic format (this may not be news; I do not check that page often). I like the graphic display of on-time data and reasons for cancellation. However, the data for 3 lines—Morris, North Jersey Coast, and Raritan—are missing, and one still must download each line's information separately—please, we need a “download all” link.

I was pleased to see a PTC report highlighted on the home page, and when I clicked there were links to detailed documents, including an up-to-date report, posted yesterday—thank you for doing that as we

(con't.)

# Lackawanna Coalition Statement (con't.)



approach the end of the project. We also want to thank you for posting the Administration Committee agendas and recordings on the board web page.

## Planning Service for the Future

I hear from Lackawanna Chairperson David Peter Alan that ridership patterns have changed. He notes that so-called reverse commuting—away from New York City in the morning, toward it in the evening—has picked up, as has midday and weekend ridership. We encourage you to rethink your scheduled service to consider this pattern, and the delayed return to offices (or continued work-from-home days for many). We also consider increased frequency important not only for transit-dependent riders, but also for those whose travel is outside what have been traditional peak hours; it is time to reimagine your schedules for a postpandemic world.

Sally Jane Gellert  
Legislative Director  
Communications Director  
Lackawanna Coalition

- 1 <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/transportation/2020/10/19/environmentalists-make-headway-nj-transit-over-transitgrid/3711321001/>
- 2 [https://www.njtransit.com/node/1271187?fbclid=IwAR3PYQ9uSrPVre5Lt7Gq93QBdB7VGlVtghbkjL8ZG7nKzwOM908G\\_-A7i8](https://www.njtransit.com/node/1271187?fbclid=IwAR3PYQ9uSrPVre5Lt7Gq93QBdB7VGlVtghbkjL8ZG7nKzwOM908G_-A7i8)

The screenshot shows the NJ Transit website for Aberdeen Matawan Station. The station address is Main St. & Atlantic Ave., Matawan, NJ 07747. The page lists parking lots, contact information, and ticketing services. A map on the right shows the station location with a red circle around the intersection of Main St. and Atlantic Ave. and another red circle around the 4-digit ZIP code 7747.

**Aberdeen Matawan Station**  
Main St. & Atlantic Ave., Matawan, NJ 07747

**Parking**

Lot 1 (Atlantic Ave & Main St)  
Lot Location: Atlantic Ave & Main St  
Owner: NJ TRANSIT  
Contact: Matawan Borough  
Phone: (732) 290-2004  
Standard Spaces: 417  
Accessible Spaces: 7  
Evenings: FREE AFTER 11 AM  
Nights: REMOVE CAR BY 5 AM  
Weekends: FREE  
On-Street: NO PARKING  
Website: <http://matawanborough.com>  
Type of Parking: Permit  
Resident: \$140/QUARTER OR \$480/YEAR  
Non-Resident: \$140/QUARTER OR \$480/YEAR

Lot 2 (High St & Atlantic Ave)  
Lot 3 (High St & Atlantic Ave)  
Lot 4 (Atlantic Ave)

**Commuter Rail Lines**  
North Jersey Coast  
Check All Alerts

**Station Advisories**  
Aberdeen Matawan Station

**Bike Racks**  
Bike Racks or Lockers: Available  
More information here.

**Ticketing Services**  
Ticket Office Hours:  
Main St. & Railroad Plaza, Aberdeen/Matawan, NJ 07747  
6:00AM - 1:30 PM (Monday-Friday)  
CLOSED on Saturday  
CLOSED on Sunday  
10:30AM - 10:50AM (Lunch)

**Stay Informed**  
Service Near Location  
View DepartureVision  
Plan Your Trip  
Origin: Select Station  
Destination: Select Station  
Depart At: 10/20/2020 7:00 PM  
Accessible

**PLAN YOUR TRIP**

Left, Screen Shot from njtransit.com; Right, Screen Shot from bing.com maps. Circled are (1) 4-digit ZIP code and (2) intersection of Main St. and Atlantic Ave. (not the actual station location, but maybe close enough?) and actual station location, hard to recognize on NJTransit map (no explanation of orange item). Streets illegible, even expanded, and no pedestrian instructions for anyone not familiar with using the trip planner.