

RAILGRAM

Norfolk Southern Rips Up Tracks On Former Lower Greenwood Lake Line

Commentary By **VITO HAVRILLA**, Legislative Director

After securing a \$65 million deal to transfer the right-of-way of the former Greenwood Lake line to the non-governmental organization Open Space Initiative, Norfolk-Southern (NS) railroad began to rip up tracks at the end of last year. Right now, Norfolk Southern is a household name due to the derailment and controlled burn in East Palestine, Ohio.

The right-of-way was part of the Greenwood Lake Railroad. The Greenwood Lake service, which was set up by the Erie Railroad and technically merged into it during World War I, was operated first by Erie, then the Erie Lackawanna, then Conrail, which was divided into the NS and CSX., with NS taking control of the right-of-way. NJ Transit used this right-of-way for passenger service starting in 1983, and by predecessors before that, with the last freight service on the line being semi-weekly, then weekly, from Dover to Hartz Mountain in Bloomfield (the former Charms candy plant) via the Montclair junction. Despite protests, passenger service on this section of the “Greenwood Lake-Boonton Line”, as it was called then, ended in September 2002 when the Montclair connection opened. NJT claimed the area to be a redundant catchment area. Attempts by James Wilson to run his own passenger trains on the line failed.

The line west of DB Draw over the Hackensack River between Secaucus and Kearny, has not had freight trains for over 10 years. NJT sometimes parked maintenance-of-way vehicles on the right-of-way near Pine Street in Montclair. NS kept rolling stock, usually flatbed cars, on the right-of-way in Secaucus/Jersey City. Despite calls to secure the line for future passenger use, the right-of-way fell into disrepair. Norfolk Southern sold off this right-of-way to gain some financial capital and avoid maintenance costs. (Incidentally, NJT recently purchased the Washington Secondary between Netcong and Hackettstown from Norfolk Southern. However, do not expect service west of Lake Hopatcong to improve any time soon.)

By the time this article goes to print, the tracks between the junction at Pine Street in Montclair to DB Draw in the Meadowlands will be ripped up. The tracks east of DB Draw are being ripped up as well. The next time you see the right-of-way where it goes under the Northeast Corridor, there will be no more track. Norfolk Southern will retain salvage rights on the right-of-way. In the coming years it will be turned into a “linear park” and “rail trail”.

It appears to be a strange situation; bicyclists/hikers and transit riders are becoming political enemies. Many, but not all, bicyclists/hikers applaud rails-to-trails. Some bicyclist organizations oppose highway expansion. Some hiking organizations want rail-with-trails. Nonetheless, various biking/walking organizations in New Jersey are more than happy to deprive the others of mobility. It is bad enough that transit advocates have to fight motorists, politicians, and the transportation-industrial complex. Now transit advocates have to fight bicyclists and hikers, too. Railroad magnate

Jay Gould said that he could pay half the working class to kill the other half.

There is one small consolation: at least Norfolk Southern cannot send any 2-mile-long trains with hazardous materials into my area now.

Residents of the Ampere Neighborhood Want Their Station Back

By **DAVID PETER ALAN**

Three members of the Ampere Civic Improvement Association appeared at the Lackawanna Coalition meeting on February 27 and described their efforts to persuade New Jersey Transit to restore service at the Ampere Station, for the first time after it was discontinued almost 32 years ago.

From 1893 until 1991, the Lackawanna Railroad and its successors, the Erie-Lackawanna and NJ Transit, stopped at the former station, located in the northeastern corner of East Orange near Newark and Bloomfield. The station was on the old Montclair Branch (now part of the Montclair-Boonton Line) between Watsessing Avenue in Bloomfield and Roseville Avenue in Newark, where the line to Montclair and beyond split from the Morris & Essex Line, and which had lost its trains in 1984. The station was named after André-Marie Ampère, a pioneer in electrodynamics, after whom the unit of electrical current is named.

There was a proposal by the City of East Orange to revive the station in 2005. A planner who represented the city presented the idea to the Coalition at that time, and the Coalition was supportive, but the idea got only as far as a feasibility study. From 1968 until the Montclair Connection opened in 2002, the only trains on the Montclair Branch ran during historic commuting hours between Hoboken and Montclair. Full weekday service to Montclair State Station began in 2002, and limited weekend service started in 2010. There has been renewed interest from time to time in reviving the station, and there is now a petition circulating among local residents.

Miguel Santos, one of the presenters for the Association, told the Coalition that the Ampere neighborhood has improved since service ended, and that he believed that there would be substantial ridership for a revived stop, and that local businesses would also benefit. He mentioned that property values are rising, businesses are opening, and many local households do not have automobiles. East Orange’s other stations (Brick Church and the eponymous East Orange Station) are both across town from, and not easily accessible to, residents in the Ampere neighborhood. The Coalition voted to approve a resolution supporting the restoration of service at Ampere and is scheduled to ratify the precise language of that resolution at its meeting scheduled for March 27.

Report from the Chair

By **SALLY JANE GELLERT**, Chairperson

The biggest train-related story since our last issue of the *Railgram* has to be the Norfolk Southern derailment in East Palestine, Ohio. We note that the problem was compounded by a slow EPA response that allowed the corporation’s request to burn off toxic chemicals—possibly necessary to avoid an (*Article continues on reverse side*)

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: March 27 and April 24. info@lackawannacoalition.org

Report from the Chair *(Continued from reverse side)*

uncontrolled explosion, but done in such a way that the burn was incomplete and unknown chemicals, possibly dioxins, were released. Worse, the rather delayed air-quality monitoring did not include testing for the deadly dioxins, but only for their precursors.

Sadly, this just further damages the public image of railroads, building on railroad workers' almost-strike of early December of last year. The President shut down the strike, in the interest of avoiding supply-chain issues, but it was surely a controversy that damaged the public image of rail.

Here in New Jersey, NJ Transit is spending down national subsidies at a great rate, with no plans to address the fiscal cliff that is coming in year 2026 if nothing changes. At our March meeting, we will hear from our Legislative Director looking at NJ Transit's funding—for years, advocates have asked for dedicated funding for NJT, so that the agency can make multiyear plans and passengers have a sense of security about the continuity of the service and an understanding of when and why fare increases happen. I note that Governor Murphy has announced another year of no fare increase—naturally, passengers are pleased, but if one delves into NJ Transit finances, and sees the size of the deficit coming in Fiscal Year 2026, one can't help but fear either a large increase or a deep cut to service looming on the horizon.

One ongoing problem at NJ Transit is its traditional and continuing lack of transparency. We joke about even the windows not being transparent, but from many perspectives, it is hard to get information from NJ Transit management. The most recent concern is that of the Senior Citizen and Disabled Residents Transportation Advisory Committee, with which the Coalition shares a number of members (including me). New regulations for the committee were proposed at the December board meeting, and members of the committee only learned of a proposed drastic reduction in their purview accidentally and shortly before that meeting. When we voiced our objections, the item was tabled, and the committee and NJ Transit management are negotiating.

The record of board votes—with the few members who voted No on an item (other than pulling the Academy bus contract after years of dishonesty were revealed) or even asked hard questions either not being reappointed or resigning—is worrisome. Let's hope that someone at NJ Transit sees the value of advice from a committee with firsthand experience, especially as the committee has no direct power to put any policy into action.

RUN to Newark at the End of April!

By **DAVID PETER ALAN**

The RAIL Users' Network (RUN) will be coming to Newark on Friday, April 28, for its first "in person" conference since the COVID-19 pandemic sent RUN, the Lackawanna Coalition, and most of society into "virtual space" for the past few years.

The conference itself will take place from 8:30 A.M. until 4:50 P.M. at the offices of the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA), located at One Newark Center, one block from Penn Station on McCarter Highway. The Lackawanna Coalition, an organizational member of RUN, is the "advocacy host" for the event, and Chairperson Sally Gellert will be on hand to welcome attendees.

The theme for the conference will be "Good Connections: Why the Northeastern Rail Network is Important to the Entire U.S." William C. Vantuono, Editor-in-Chief of *Railway Age*, will give the keynote address. Also featured will be Arthur S. Guzzetti, Vice-President for Policy and Mobility at the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) and an original employee at NJ Transit when it was founded in 1979. He will focus on infrastructure and how it affects the Northeast Region. Two Coalition members who are also Contributing Editors at *Railway Age* will also present on a panel about "Making the Case: Presenting Your Ideas to Managers, Politicians, and Journalists". RUN Board member and former Coalition chair David Peter Alan will moderate. The panel will include Jim

Blaze, a transportation economist and *Railway Age* contributing editor; RUN Vice-Chair Andrew Albert, who is also Chair of the NYC Transit Riders' Council; and longtime journalist and legislative staffer Mark Magyar, who is now Director of the Sweeney Center at Rowan University.

Amtrak and the Gateway Program Development Corp. will be represented, as will advocates with expanding passenger rail in Pennsylvania and rail transit in Baltimore. There will also be a Public Forum, at which attendees can present their own ideas for improving rail service in the Northeast.

The cost for attending the conference in person is \$50 for RUN members and \$65 for nonmembers. Online attendance is also available for \$25 for members and \$40 for nonmembers. Nonmembers will receive a RUN membership for the rest of the year.

There will be other events in connection with the conference, including an informal post-session dinner in the Ironbound. On Saturday, there will be an optional tour that features places where transit modes connect with each other on New Jersey Transit, including a walking tour of Penn Station New York led by Lackawanna Coalition member and former LIRR Planning Director Joseph Clift. After that, we will take the subway to Brooklyn and visit the unique and world-famous New York Transit Museum. We will also have dinner at Junior's, a famous restaurant in downtown Brooklyn, and conclude the tour with a look at the historic Grand Central Terminal and the brand new Long Island Rail Road station.

So RUN to Newark on Friday, April 28 for the conference, stay on Saturday for the tour, and spend some time riding on NJ Transit. We look forward to seeing you then. To register, go to the RUN website, <https://www.railusers.net>.

Budget Season Is Here!

By **SALLY JANE GELLERT**

Checking the state legislature's home page as this issue goes to press, we found that the annual Senate and Assembly budget hearings have been announced; the first on March 14th, the final on April 25th. Each year the legislature spends much of this season hearing from constituents about particular budget concerns, suggestions for more, less, or redirected spending, all based on the governor's February budget address (this year presented on Tuesday, February 28th—the last possible legal date). As usual, we will be testifying at both an Assembly and a Senate hearing, looking to ensure that transportation dollars are spent less on widening highways and more on improving public transportation across the state, particularly our particular focus, NJT rail service.

Coming Attractions for Meeting Presentations

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

This month, Lackawanna Coalition Legislative Director Vito Havrilla will present information on the NJ State Budget. Governor Murphy's budget address was the day after last month's meeting, which kicked off Budget Season in Trenton. How will the state budget support our transit agency? Are we any closer to dedicated funding for the agency, or are we again relying on diversions from the NJ Turnpike Authority and the Clean Energy Fund?

In April, we will host Legislative Chairperson Gloria R. Mills of NJ Transit's Senior Citizen and Disabled Riders Transportation Advisory Committee (SCDRTAC) to discuss rail-related legislation in Trenton, particularly those bills in which our groups' interests intersect. She will likely have an update on SCDRTAC's struggle to retain its full traditional purview (see "Report from the Chair").

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