

RAILGRAM

Lackawanna Coalition Participates in National Rail Conference

By DAVID PETER ALAN

On Friday, April 28th, the Lackawanna Coalition participated in the national rail conference of the Rail Users' Network (<https://railusers.net>). The conference was held online, after RUN's conference committee received many more registrations from potential attendees who selected the "virtual" option, rather than coming in person.

The theme of the conference was "Good Connections: Why the Northeastern Rail Network is Important to the Entire U.S." It had a regional theme with national implications, and the keynote speakers were *Railway Age* Editor-in-Chief William C. Vantuono, and Arthur S. Guzzetti, Vice-President for Policy and Mobility at the American Public Transportation Association (APTA).

The original plan called for the conference to take place in Newark three years ago, and it would have been the first "in-person" RUN conference since the COVID-19 virus struck in March 2020. The Coalition would have acted as "advocacy host", sponsoring a preconference reception and publishing an edition of the *RailgramEXTRA!* In addition, the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority (NJTPA) and NJ Transit were slated to participate, but those events were cancelled when the conference was changed to a "virtual-only" status.

The Coalition was still considered the "advocacy host" and Chairperson Sally Jane Gellert introduced our organization and its efforts to a nationwide roster of on-line attendees. I moderated a panel in the afternoon session about "Making the Case" to managers, business leaders, and elected officials. The other panelists were RUN Vice-Chair Andrew Albert, fellow *Railway Age* Contributing Editor and Coalition Member Jim Blaze, and Mark Magyar, Director of the Sweeney Center for Policy at Rowan University in Glassboro. Other Coalition members listened to the conference and joined the discussion.

Other presenters gave updates on their proposals to bring more trains to Pennsylvania (including on the Lackawanna Cutoff through West Jersey and the Poconos to Scranton, which the Coalition has supported for decades), between Philadelphia and Reading, and more trains across the state to Pittsburgh. One gave a cautionary tale of race and politics in Baltimore. Representatives of Amtrak and the Gateway Program Development Commission promoted the Portal North Bridge and Gateway's Hudson Tunnel Project, and a veteran railroader from Indiana closed the conference with his views.

I filed a detailed report of the conference; look for it on the *Railway Age* website, www.railwayage.com. RUN normally holds two conferences each year; by "virtual" means at the present time. If you wish to join RUN, go to the website, www.railusers.net, and there will be directions for joining and paying dues. Dues for individuals are \$40 per year, with \$25 introductory rate for the first year. The Lackawanna Coalition is an "organizational member" of RUN.

NJ Transit: Truth in Advertising, Please!

Commentary By JESSE GRIBIN

NJ Transit is lying. I don't say this because of dishonesty in their dealings, or the fact that their IT constantly claims that trains are running and on time when they are in fact not. No, this is dishonesty in advertising. They claim, prominently—in advertising, news releases, and elsewhere—the following lie: "NJ TRANSIT is the nation's largest statewide public transportation system." NJ Transit is of the nation, and it is the only statewide public transportation provider (though Rhode Island's RIPTA does have statewide buses), so it is therefore the largest. The lie? It's in that final word: *system*.

System, Oxford English, Definition 1: *a set of things working together as parts of a mechanism or an interconnecting network.*

NJ Transit is not a system. It does not work, it does not work together, and it does not coherently interconnect. Each component of NJ Transit, each rail line, each bus line, each light-rail line, works only as an independent entity, often scheduled in what seems to be Swiss precision to **not** connect; it seems like as often as possible, the wait times experienced by users are the longest it possibly could be.

If you are connecting between the M&E and the Newark Division, your "connection" to the light rail system can almost make it faster to walk between Broad Street and Penn. At the Trenton Transit Center, the RiverLINE trains often arrive such that you can watch the New York train depart as you reach the bottom of the track stairs after rushing, out of breath, from the light rail station. Let's not even get started on how that goes when connecting between trains and buses!

The goal, in today's world of climate change, is for public transit to offer as reasonable an alternative to driving a car as possible. I grant that when I use public transit, I accept that it will take a little more time, and not get me quite as close to my destination as I can get when I drive. However, speaking as a motorist who **can** do that if I so choose, I will still use the system when the convenience of not having to actively engage in driving a car outweighs the inconvenience of a longer trip.

How can transit hope to provide for that if at every connection point in my trip I have to wait 29 minutes or 58 minutes for the next scheduled half-hourly or hourly "connecting" transportation? Why are logically connecting bus and train routes scheduled to misconnect by 2 minutes, when running the first just a few minutes earlier, or the next a few minutes later, would save 30 minutes or an hour from a passenger's trip?

NJ Transit treats each of its components as independent parts, and then calls itself a system. To stop lying, it can do one of two things: it can stop calling itself a system, or it can start endeavoring to serve as a system. I would prefer the latter.

Jesse Gribin is the former treasurer of the Lackawanna Coalition.

Editor's note: It sometimes pays to speak up. On the way home from the RUN transit tour on Saturday, April 29th, the 5:11 Morris & Essex train was held up 7 minutes. As it is the connecting train printed on the schedule to connect with the Bergen line, we asked if they would be holding that train. The conductor called, unsure, and was told that the train would indeed wait for us. That little bit of courtesy is really appreciated—but why must a passenger make the request? If I hadn't been in a supportive group, I would

(Article 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: May 22 and June 26. info@lackawannacoalition.org

Truth in Advertising *(Continued from reverse)*

likely have spent an unnecessary hour in Secaucus. As it was, riding the escalator to platform G, I heard the “last and final call”, and I noted a number of others rushing onto the train, one of them asking me to confirm that it was indeed a Bergen-line train, so my request helped them, also, avoid an inconvenient 1-hour wait.

Report from the Chair

By **SALLY JANE GELLERT**, Chairperson

Budget season is in full swing in Trenton, and as April turned to May Legislative Director Vito Havrilla presented remarks at a Senate hearing. These have been posted to our website and forum. Kevin Corbett appeared at a later hearing and admitted that fare increases are on the table despite the governor’s denial. The last increase was in 2015. Since then, inflation has continued and ridership is still only 75% of 2019 pre-pandemic levels, so it is hard to argue against *any* increase—and yet we know that many transit-dependent people have limited income and would be hit especially hard. We’d like to see a means-tested discount if there is to be any increase. It has become routine for advocates to call for dedicated state funding—which almost all agencies of similar size have—yet that has yet to materialize.

NJ Transit is currently getting by on federal funding, hiding the real problem—and by fiscal year 2026, the agency will face a deficit approaching \$1 billion. It is time for the state legislature to get serious about finding money to keep the trains and buses running. (We’d argue that such projects as the NJTRANSITgrid should be put on hold, with energy generation left to the professionals rather than the transit agency creating “NJ Transit Power and Light”—especially with an expensive new fracked-gas project in an environmental justice community.)

NJ Transit recently announced plans to move its headquarters out of the building that it now owns outright, moving a short distance away to the Gateway complex, owned by a Murphy/Democratic Party donor, where the agency will be leasing space. Along with Asm. Brian Rumpf and some others, we question that decision. The justification given is that the current building needs \$100 million in renovations to be suitable—which is surprising, as the agency has been in its current location for some time, apparently without complaint. In fact, just before the pandemic, the board room itself was redone with an elaborate dais, large screens for displaying exhibits and streamed video, etc.—where were the concerns about the building then? This hardly seems the time to be moving to a high-end rental facility, especially with the bad optics (at least) of renting from a politically connected owner.

In the agenda for the May board meeting, the schedule for board meetings for fiscal year 2024 were announced: as has become standard, 5 morning and 5 evening meetings. After much outcry from members of the public, Commissioner Gutierrez-Scaccetti promised that they would not start meetings with executive sessions, but hold them before the announced starting time or after the public meeting. That has almost always held true, and we recognize the common courtesy; morning meetings now start at 10 A.M. and evening meetings continue to start at 6 P.M. As always, we bring our members’ issues to the board meetings—or as much as I can fit into 3 quick-talking minutes! Since resuming in-person meetings, the phone option for the public to call in has been retained, which is helpful for many individuals.

Last month at the board meeting, the board approved forwarding new regulations for SCDRTAC—congratulations to my fellow SCDRTAC members and to David Peter Alan as chairperson and chief negotiator for protecting that committee’s traditional purview (see Dave’s commentary elsewhere in this issue).

We were pleased to see on the May agenda the continuation of Sunday service on a number of bus lines—apparently NJT’s dismal effort at publicizing March hearings for the project, resulting in an embarrassingly small participation, did not dissuade them from doing the right thing for riders. We’d gladly help share the notice next time, if only we see it!

We were looking forward to our role as advocate cohost of the Rail Users’ Network (RUN; railusers.net) conference on Friday, April

28th, in person at the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority; unfortunately, it went online instead, as you will read in Dave Alan’s report. We were able to hold the advertised Transit Tour the next day, in the rain, and rode rail and light rail in Essex, Hudson, and Bergen counties, and toured N.Y. Penn Station with member Joe Clift. Next time, in better weather, we will continue to Grand Central!

Advocacy for Seniors and Riders with Disabilities Continues at NJ Transit

Commentary by **DAVID PETER ALAN**

I am now in my 20th year as a member of NJ Transit’s Senior Citizens and Disabled Residents Transportation Advisory Committee (SCDRTAC). I was also elected Committee Chairperson last December, for the 2023–24 term. Despite all of my long-held hopes and expectations that I could help lead the Committee toward improvements in our efforts to help bring more mobility to our constituents, the first reaction that I encountered from NJ Transit leadership was an attack on the Committee—an effort to eliminate almost all of its purview and allow it only the authority to comment on a single item: a grant program for county-level providers that the Committee has consistently supported for almost 40 years.

Fortunately, we were able to demonstrate that NJ Transit has consistently supported a broad purview for the Committee (at least until now), and NJ Transit management agreed to accept the Committee’s historic broad scope of authority to make comments and suggestions. Although we remain strictly an advisory body and nobody is required to implement our suggestions, the fact that we are still allowed to make those suggestions is a major victory. We have consistently considered topics such as transit accessibility issues, accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), connectivity within and between transit modes, funding for transit, Access Link paratransit, and service issues on fixed-route rail and bus services, as well as community transit, most of which is operated by the counties. On April 19th, the NJ Transit Board approved new regulations for the grant program (Senior Citizens and Disabled Residents Transportation Assistance Program or SCDRTAP), so the continuation of our historic purview, which is part of the regulations, is included in the submission that begins the formal approval process.

The negotiations were spirited and sometimes difficult, but, in the end, professionalism on both sides and a true comprehension of the situation won out. SCDRTAC is again looking for suggestions on a broad range of topics concerning transportation on NJ Transit and its affiliated carriers for seniors and riders with disabilities. Five members of the Lackawanna Coalition are also members of SCDRTAC, including Vice Chairpersons Sally Jane Gellert and Jim Blaze.

We at SCDRTAC welcome your suggestions and invite you to attend our meetings. We usually meet at 10:30 A.M. on the fourth Monday of the month, 8¼ hours before Coalition meetings begin. Most SCDRTAC meetings are held at NJ Transit’s offices in Newark, and some are held in Trenton or Camden. We encourage you to help us to help NJ Transit’s most-vulnerable riders.

Coming Attractions for Meeting Presentations

Henry Posner III, chairman, Rail Development Corporation and chairman of the East Broad Top Foundation, is the invited speaker for our May 22 meeting. We’ll keep you updated on speakers and presentations for our upcoming meetings!

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