

RAILGRAM

RUN for Better Trains and A Better Environment

By **DAVID PETER ALAN**

Coalition Chairperson Sally Jane Gellert came to rail advocacy through the environmental movement. She participated in the first Earth Day, back in 1970, when she was in high school. Today, she is one of a number of advocates for trains and rail transit who appreciate the connection between rail and a cleaner environment, but many “mainstream” environmental advocates have not noticed the same connection.

The Rail Users’ Network (RUN), of which the Coalition is an organizational member, will focus on the link between rail advocacy and environmental advocacy at its next on-line conference. It will take place on Saturday afternoon, Oct. 21, from 12:30 until 5:00.

The conference will feature rail advocates from around the country who also push for measures that will improve the environment, and see more trains and better rail transit as part of the overall plan to conserve energy and mitigate climate change. Topics will include efforts by rail-oriented members of the Sierra Club to call attention to the importance of electrified rail lines, efforts to keep rail service going when part of a right-of-way is converted into a recreational trail, and suggestions for motivating environmental advocates to think about trains and transit. I will conclude the conference with a brief summation.

This marks the first time that RUN has devoted a conference to environmental issues and advocacy, as a component of rail advocacy, and vice-versa. There will be no charge for RUN members, and the cost for non-members will be \$25.00. That will include an “introductory” membership in RUN, which will be valid through the end of next year.

For more information, check the RUN website, www.railusers.net, and click the link to the conference.

Coalition Calls for Saving Kingsland Station

By **DAVID PETER ALAN**

The Lackawanna Coalition passed a resolution at its July meeting that calls on New Jersey Transit to save the Kingsland station, located on Ridge Road in Lyndhurst. The agency has proposed enlarging parking facilities and making other improvements at the Lyndhurst Station; the next station going toward Suffern, but the 2021 proposal under consideration called for eliminating Kingsland.

The Coalition’s resolution states that the Kingsland Station “is located on Ridge Road, in a residential neighborhood with local businesses, which makes it walkable for local residents” and “is connected to points from Newark to Hackensack on the #76 bus, which runs a full-service schedule”. In the resolution, the Coalition

also noted that the cost of keeping both the Kingsland and Lyndhurst stations open would be “nominal” and that the Lyndhurst Station “is not located within convenient walking distance of the Kingsland Station, nor does it have Kingsland’s bus connection”.

The Coalition urged NJ Transit to continue operating both stations, and also urged civic leaders and others concerned to join the initiative to keep the Kingsland Station “as a viable passenger-rail facility”.

The original Kingsland Station was built by the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad (Lackawanna) as a parallel route for the Morris & Essex Line, where there would be more room for freight, but there have been passenger trains on the line since 1870. In 1963, the configuration of the line was changed, and the part of the Lackawanna Boonton Line east between Hoboken and Athenia in Clifton was joined with parts of the Historic Erie Railroad as the “Main Line”; a designation still used today.

The station house sits along Ridge Road, and there are separate stairways down to the platforms in each direction at ground level. The current station was built in 1918. Kingsland is part of the Coalition’s heritage, not only because it connects with the Morris & Essex Line at Hoboken, but also because the station was originally built by the Lackawanna Railroad. At the meeting when the resolution was passed, the Coalition did not object to planned improvements at Lyndhurst, but wants Kingsland to stay open, too, serving its own catchment area.

Report from the Chair

By **SALLY JANE GELLERT**, Chairperson

A lot has been written about NJ Transit’s decision to sell its headquarters building and move to the expensive Gateway building, so there is no point in belaboring it here. If in fact it was a well-reasoned decision, then the board shot itself in the foot by not revealing more details and the justification. We in New Jersey are so used to the lack of transparency—and, sadly, even the legislators rarely questioning any agency actions—that we tend to complain and move on, but when no explanations are given, we worry. Worse yet, the opponents of transit are strengthened in the quest to deny the agency funds on the (unsupported yet also unrebutted) grounds they waste money.

Coming up this month is the March to End Fossil Fuels. I note that we continue to support environmental activists and local residents in asking the agency to be forward-thinking, to support the state renewable-energy goals with a NJ Transitgrid that is focused on clean energy, not fracked gas. We urge the board and staff to think in terms of “one and done”, not “stopgap today, solar tomorrow”. Knowing that a lot of marchers are not familiar with NJ Transit trains, LC members will be at some of the stations to help folks navigate senior fares, ticket vending machines, apps, and getting through Secaucus Junction and New York Penn Station. We look forward to providing this public service and making new friends for the Coalition.

On Sept. 30, we will be taking a Connections Tour of local transit, starting at 10:30 A.M. at Newark Penn Station and ending at about 3 P.M. at Grand Central Terminal. All are welcome to join us—look for us in the Newark waiting room. We’re also discussing a fall foliage ride to Port Jervis; watch our website for details.

(Newsletter 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: September 18 and October 23. info@lackawannacoalition.org

LC Members Assist New Riders

By **SALLY JANE GELLERT**

The Lackawanna Coalition realizes that many people are nervous about taking public transportation, and yet for the March to End Fossil Fuels on Sunday, Sept. 17, both for practical reasons (a number of streets near the march route will be closed off, meaning close parking is also less available than usual) and for environmental reasons (driving through traffic to march for the end of fossil fuels is ironic at best, and uncomfortable at worst), many New Jerseyans who most often drive will be rallying at train stations that morning and travelling together, by train, to the march. Many of them will be infrequent or brand-new riders, and a good experience might encourage them to consider riding the rails more often.

To this end, Lackawanna Coalition members are stepping up encourage environmentally concerned persons to take the train more often and help familiarize them with the railroad. In the past, Coalition members have been at Secaucus Station to observe NJ Transit's handling of events such as the Superbowl game in 2014, and along with NJ Transit staff that is sometimes deployed, have helped new riders. We see the possibility for such public service again on Sept. 17, and will be out at some stations (personally, I will be at Anderson Street) at which rallies are happening. Some folks will be sending off marchers at the end of the rally; others will be taking the train to join the march. Whichever role feels most comfortable to you, links to information about each specific rally and which train is recommended may be found at <https://www.endfossilfuels.us/logistics> (scroll down—but if you want to see the list of more than 150 interest- or identity-based hubs, there is a link for that near the top of the page).

What Is That Photo?

By **SALLY JANE GELLERT**, Chairperson

Citizen advocate Adam Reich recently brought to our attention a major flaw in NJ Transit's social media: the lack of ALT text for many of their images, particularly problematical when they have text over the image. Web developers and designers know that for screen readers, text-over-image is not acceptable; basically, that configuration should not be used. Like so many, however, we realize that it is commonly used, can be very attractive, and will not be going away any time soon.

However, that does not mean neglecting those who use screen readers for whatever reason: visually impaired, cognitive limitations leading to confusion, susceptible to sensory overload—really, it does not matter and is nobody's business. What is everyone's business, however, is Internet and social-media accessibility—sometimes abbreviated a11y (yes, those are numeral ones, to represent the 11 letters missing from the word *accessibility*)—which means that every site, every social media post, should be understandable by all, however they access it.

Decorative photos are disregarded by screen readers, and the way that Web weavers designate that is by not including ALT text for a screen reader to see—but when the image is important, such as an event announcement, or a discount offer, or exhibit hours, then it is critical that ALT text be included. Twitter (sorry, not X to me!) has a setting that will prompt you to include a description of any image you post, which is a good way to get into the habit. The WordPress accessibility plug-in that we use for lackawannacoalition.org has a similar checkbox to mark an image as decorative, and requires either that designation or the inclusion of ALT text before an image can be saved. If I can manage this, why can't the PR/social media staff of one of the country's largest transit agencies?

Congratulations—But Wait!

COMMENTARY by **SALLY JANE GELLERT**

We congratulate NJ Transit on winning its most recent award, for 2023 Outstanding Public Transportation System, from APTA. As the third largest transit agency in the country, and the only one running statewide transit (though density varies), NJ Transit is in limited company, yet that

company includes large, prominent agencies, so it is quite an accomplishment to have earned this reward. Bravo!

Here is our question, though: Why do we see news reports of yet another sexual-harassment suit being settled? It seems that annually, at least, we see another “amount discussed in executive session” being paid out to an employee or former employee, sometimes after a transfer to another NJT department, sometimes after the individual has left the company entirely. This is a problem for multiple reasons, most important being the human cost when employees are disrespected, but also a financial problem: NJ Transit needs those funds to stave off the disaster looming in Fiscal Year 2026, when the COVID-19 relief money runs out. Please, please, NJ Transit board and management, get your act together and change the corporate culture that spawns these repeated lawsuits.

Strike! (but not yet)

COMMENTARY by **SALLY JANE GELLERT**

The vote is in (as of August 31), and it is overwhelmingly favorable to a strike: the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) union voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike (of 494 eligible members, 399 returned ballots; 397 of these voted for strike authorization, and two ballots were ruled void, as reported by *Trains* magazine on Sept. 1), but there is not a strike in the immediate future. After a \$50,000 payment to the agency resulting from the 2022 sick-out, the union surely will not walk out early, and there is what NJ Transit's Kevin Corbett has called a “long negotiation process” ahead. NJ Transit's lawsuit, alleging a planned strike for Labor Day, was dismissed; the union called it frivolous. The agency points out that 14 of the 15 unions have signed contracts; the engineers counter that they are second-worst-paid engineers in a high-cost area and want parity or close to it, not simply the same “pattern settlement” to which others have agreed. Mediation has been in progress for 3 years; when it finally ends, if there is not an agreement, there is an additional 30-day “cooling-off period”.

The Lackawanna Coalition does not take a position: nobody ever wants a strike, but neither do we want workers underpaid, with the consequent high turnover—and we are also very aware of the end of the COVID-19 relief funds coming in Fiscal Year 2026. We have heard rumors of both fare increases (up to 35%) and service cuts, and nobody wants either of those, either—especially those who depend on public transit for all of their independent mobility (yes, there are taxis and taxilike ride-hailing companies, and the kindness of friends, but with increasing congestion and pollution, we need more [preferably electric] transit, not less).

In sum, we hope that both sides look at the situation realistically and compassionately and come to a workable agreement without the need for a strike, particularly a protracted one. We have not had such a strike since 1983; that strike lasted 34 days. Let's do all we can to avoid a repeat!

Correction: In the July/August *Railgram*, the ALP-44 was referred to as a rail car, instead of a locomotive. We regret the error, which has been corrected in the online version of the article.

Lackawanna Coalition

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Coming Attractions for Meeting Presentations

We have a great line-up of presentations for you at our upcoming meetings! Last month, Lackawanna Coalition Secretary Daniel Chazin took us railfanning in Philadelphia and the area. We ran out of time, so he is coming back by popular demand to finish the journey, or take us elsewhere, at our September meeting. In October, Chairperson Emeritus David Peter Alan will take us on his recent journeys in Canada, including Churchill, Winnipeg, and more. In November, Alan Drake from New Orleans will bring us information on international rail.