

RAILGRAM

11-Day Service Disruption Affects M&E Riders in Morris County

By **DAVID PETER ALAN**

An 11-day service disruption severely affected travel for many Morris & Essex (M&E) Line riders in December. All service between Morristown and Denville Junction was suspended, and there was only limited train service to Denville, Dover, and points west. Morris Plains and Mount Tabor had none.

The outage was blamed on an incident on Sunday night, December 3, when a work train pulled down some overhead wire and damaged supporting structure for the wire near Mount Tabor. It took until Thursday, December 14 to restore service. In the meantime, the regular schedule between Penn Station New York and Morristown ran, although some of the weekday trains to and from Hoboken were annulled. Midday train 854 from Hackettstown on the 14th was the first train to run on the M&E after repairs were completed. It ran non-stop to Newark as had been planned during the outage, skipping all of the stops between there and Newark that it would have made under normal operation.

Weekday trains served Denville from the Boonton Line platform and all other stops as far west as Hackettstown on roughly the regular weekday schedule. Those trains detoured over the Montclair-Boonton Line between Newark's Broad Street Station and Denville Junction, ran express to Denville, stopping on the Boonton Line platform. That schedule served Denville and Dover with few trains outside the peak-commuting period, but mostly during commuting times, when they are also served by trains scheduled on the Montclair-Boonton Line, which was not affected.

Train 851, which normally leaves Newark at 9:31 A.M. was rescheduled to leave at 9:59; just 4 minutes ahead of Train 6231 on the Montclair line to Montclair State Station. Riders who got on the wrong train (and there were some when I rode) had to go to Dover, wait until 12:32 to leave, bypass their Montclair-area stop, arrive at Newark at 1:54, and wait until 2:16 for a train that would take them to their destinations. An unscheduled stop to drop them off at Montclair State would have allowed them to take Train 6226 back toward their destinations at 10:51, saving hours of passenger time.

One unusual feature of the weekday operation was the vastly increased use of the Montclair-Boonton Line west of Montclair State, including the rarely used passing track at Lincoln Park. On the occasion when I took a scheduled train to Dover in the afternoon and an early-evening train on the detour, we waited there while 2 westbound trains went by. I took several rides on rerouted trains during the disruption, and ridership was light on all of them: less than 25 passengers per train.

The only service available in the affected area was provided by local buses in Morris County, and that service is always limited. The 875 and 880 lines run between Morristown and Dover on different routes, but service runs infrequently and ends early in the evening. That gave passengers going to Morris Plains or Mount Tabor limited options, and without timed connections at Morristown.

The weekend situation was even more dire for riders who would have gone west of Morristown if the trains had been running there. There is no weekend service on the Boonton Line west of Montclair State, so there were no trains at all in the affected area. Only the 880 bus runs on Saturdays (including December 9). It runs 8 times a day in each direction, but only 4 of those arrivals or departures at Morristown represented convenient connections to or from points west to Dover. Morris County buses do not run on Sundays, so there was no transit at all west of Morristown on the Sunday during the outage.

The weekend situation was different on the Gladstone Branch. NJ Transit had contracted with the Lakeland Bus Company to run hourly shuttles between Summit and Gladstone, due to track work. A similar operation between Morristown and Dover would have provided full service between those points and intermediate stations, and it would have required only 2 buses to make the required trips.

For decades, the Lackawanna Coalition has called for better preparedness for disruptions at NJ Transit. In this case, the agency had 5 days to place shuttle buses into operation on the weekend. It also seems possible that they could have gotten a shuttle operation going by Monday, December 4, or at least by Tuesday. We continue to wonder how they will do during the next outage.

Kingsland Station: A Downtown Asset

By **SALLY JANE GELLERT**

Last month, we postponed our 2nd-Tuesday executive committee conference call to pay a visit to the Lyndhurst town commissioners at their monthly meeting. Some months ago, when the board discussed plans for the new Lyndhurst Station, we had noted in their "wish list" capital plan the proposed closing of Kingsland Station. We were disturbed—the location of Kingsland Station, right on Ridge Road, a busy downtown district, with a bus stop for the #76 that runs between Hackensack and Newark, seems an excellent location for nonmotorists, with a good bus connection. The new Lyndhurst Station, in contrast, will be a bit closer to a parking facility, good for out-of-town folks, but is not in a very "walkable" area.

We appreciate that the municipality likes the idea of the new station, and don't have particular concerns about it, but when we brought our resolution about the proposed closing of Kingsland station to the commissioners, they were confused—apparently the ever-opaque NJ Transit had not mentioned that part of the plan to them—but sure enough, on pages 11 and 18 of the 31-page Appendix A to the 2021 capital plan, in tiny type, there it is, under Technology, Asset Management, and Planning: *Requested Funding - Kingsland Station Decommissioning [sic] Project 3.00* [that's \$3.00 million]. We'll stay in conversation with Lyndhurst, and will gladly join with residents in efforts to retain this well-used station. We have noticed that at times 35 to 40 people disembark at the station; it clearly fills a need and, given that a Main Line stop there adds very little time to a trip, we see absolutely no value in a plan to decommission Kingsland Station—a loss that is decidedly not necessary.

(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: January 22 and February 26. info@lackawannacoalition.org



Report from the Chair

By **SALLY JANE GELLERT**, Chairperson

Welcome to a new year with the Lackawanna Coalition! We have an anniversary coming up this April—well, we do every year, but the 5s and 0s seem to get the most attention. We'll turn 45 this April and will have a celebration at our meeting on the 22nd of that month (Earth Day!). We are also considering having dinner together first, so if you are interested in joining us at a Millburn restaurant, e-mail us at info@lackawannacoalition.org.

One of our former members, John Bobsin, noted this post on Trainorders: “*One question, I ran into someone over the summer and he had an app(?) that showed the lead engine or cab car for any NJT train and its current location. The transitdocs site has Amtrak train locations across the country, minus lead unit number, but where is this NJT thing?*” It got us thinking; we remember seeing such a site, nonpublished, in the past, but it vanished into a password-protected world. Some of us had used it to track disruptions, primarily, and we are now wondering why it was removed from sight—if Amtrak is O.K. with the public being able to track their trains’ movements, why not NJ Transit? We know that opacity is all too common at the agency—from curtailed agendas for board meetings, with the president’s report not available before the meeting, to missing ALT text on social-media graphics, to “Departure Fiction” that reports ghost trains—even the windows on the rail cars, especially the multilevel units, are far from transparent. It’s time for the agency to share more with the riding public!

At the February board meeting, we’ll be talking about “N.Y.C. congestion pricing”—the Manhattan Central Business District Toll Plan that is expected to start in May, lawsuits notwithstanding. What is most important to us is that it is an opportunity for NJ Transit to put its best foot forward in attracting new riders, and we are confused and upset that local and state politicians, up to and including the governor, tend to focus on blocking the plan rather than having joined early to get NJT a percentage of the revenue (given that the tolls will be partly paid by us New Jerseyans) and reminding motorists that they can avoid the extra expense by taking the train or bus. As we once again anticipate budget season in Trenton, we note two missed opportunities for better funding for our transportation agency: (1) the vetoed 3% automobile toll increase and (2) extending the corporate business tax surcharge as dedicated funding for NJ Transit, and we encourage legislators to stop kicking the can down the road and come up with a plan to address the agency’s expected fiscal year 2026 shortfall of almost \$1 billion. Don’t expect riders to cover that great a gap—and don’t cut service on which many people depend for all their mobility. Frequency and reliability are what are needed to keep customers—and that means sufficient funding!

In Coalition housekeeping, welcome to my fellow officers—some new members in our executive suite this year, with our first full complement of officers in some time: Vito Havrilla adds vice chairperson to his legislative directorship, Rachel Herman comes on board as communications director and George Kaufer as membership director. Dave Anderson returns as technical director, Daniel Chazin as secretary, and Brad Payeur as treasurer. Bob Hingel retires as vice chairperson, and we thank him for his years of service in that position—and are glad that he will be remaining aboard as Millburn Township representative. Thanks, too, to all those at town hall, especially Administrative Assistant Farah Kassim, for welcoming us to their conference room for all of our 45 years.

Railway Age Hosts Light Rail Conference in Jersey City

Impending Fiscal Cliff for Transit Mentioned

COMMENTARY By **DAVID PETER ALAN**

Railway Age and *Railway Track & Structures* (RT&S) jointly sponsored a light-rail conference in Jersey City on November 15 and 16. NJ Transit

was the “transit host” and several managers were on hand to attend the event and make presentations. NJT CEO Kevin S. Corbett gave the keynote address, focusing on the agency’s 3 light-rail lines: Hudson-Bergen Light Rail (HBLRT), Newark Light Rail, and the RiverLine between Trenton and Camden. Gregory Woods, the head of NJT’s light-rail component, explained some of the technical aspects of the HBLRT, including overtakes by *Bayonne Flyer* runs during peak-commuting periods and a tricky operational maneuver north of Hoboken.

I was on the closing panel for the conference; an all-journalist group that also featured the editors-in-chief of the two sponsoring publications. One of the issues that I raised was the impending financial catastrophe that will befall essentially every major transit agency within the next 2 years, when the COVID-19 relief money provided for transit by the federal government runs out. Most federal funding is geared toward capital projects, and not toward operations. With ridership still below pre-COVID levels in many places, I raised the possibility that providers might not have the money to operate on infrastructure financed in part with grants under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), which was also passed during the COVID emergency.

NJT Transit is one of the agencies that could be hard-hit next year, when the money is used up. That could result in massive fare increases and, even worse, severe service cuts. The Lackawanna Coalition has called on New Jersey’s political and transit leaders to work on finding more money to keep our transit going, including a dedicated source for stable, secure, and sufficient funding; a goal that has eluded the agency since it was founded more than 40 years ago. This time, the failure to provide enough money to run the system could result in consequences far more dire than NJ Transit and its riders have ever faced before.

A more-detailed report of the conference can be found on the Railway Age website, www.railwayage.com, posted on December 1. It was also posted the same day on the RT&S website, www.rtands.com.

Coming Attractions for Meeting Presentations

We congratulate NJ Transit’s Senior Citizens and Disabled Riders Transportation Advisory Committee (SCDRTAC) on their 40th anniversary this month. Chairperson Emeritus David Peter Alan brings us details. Next month, Coalition Treasurer Brad Payeur tells us of his rail travels. March brings us Alan Drake from New Orleans to discuss rail from an international perspective. Then in April, we have a milestone anniversary—the Lackawanna Coalition celebrates 45 years of advocacy!

Dues Are Due

The Lackawanna Coalition runs on a calendar-year basis, so if you have not yet renewed your membership, now is the time! Dues remain at a bargain rate of \$15 annually for individuals, \$150 for municipalities, and \$250 for counties. Renewing now gives you a full year of membership and allows us to continue to bring your concerns to the NJ Transit board each month, advocate with local and state legislators, and share our thoughts and yours with local reporters and editors. Let’s make 2024 the year that NJ Transit finally gets dedicated funding to preserve our service!

Lackawanna Coalition

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