

Leonia Light Rail
Frequently Asked Questions (“FAQs”)
November 24, 2009

What is Light Rail?

Light rail generally refers to light-weight passenger train service. In the context of our community, it is shorthand for the planned extension of the existing Hudson-Bergen line; extending electric light rail service from North Bergen up through Leonia to the Northern border of Tenafly. This project is also called the Northern Branch Corridor. This proposed commuter line would tie into ferry and PATH service to New York. The running time is estimated at approximately 15 minutes from Leonia to the Weehawken Ferry Terminal and 27 minutes to the Hoboken Terminal connecting to PATH and downtown ferry services. The project would utilize the existing freight rail right-of-way to run electric rail coaches (likely two-car units) on the line during the day and existing freight trains exclusively at night (likely after 10:30 p.m.). For more information on this project please go to the New Jersey Transit (“NJ Transit”) website, under Northern Branch Corridor at <http://www.northernbranchcorridor.com>.

What is the history of this project?

Extending passenger rail service along this corridor has been under consideration for decades by NJ Transit and the State of New Jersey. In the last few years, this project has gathered considerable momentum and the design for this project is now in the process of being finalized. It is highly likely that design plans for the light rail project will be issued for a 45-day public comment period in the next two to four months.

What is the current status of the light rail project?

NJ Transit is in the process of finalizing the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (“DEIS”), a key milestone in the project. At present, the Borough of Leonia has the greatest ability to shape the local aspects of this project. After the DEIS is issued for public comment, opportunities to modify the design to accommodate our interests may be more limited. Final concept plans will be determined in the next 4-6 months as NJ Transit reviews oral and written comments to the DEIS. Final plans will come much later prior to the bidding out of construction contracts. For complete information on the Environmental Impact Statement process, go to the NJ Transit website at <http://www.northernbranchcorridor.com/eis.html> for a description of the EIS Process. NJ Transit announced in July 2009 that electric light rail to Tenafly is the preferred local alternative. Diesel train service was not selected as the locally-preferred alternative.

How has Leonia monitored this project?

The Mayor and Council and a number of concerned residents have been monitoring this project for a number of years and have obtained information from NJ Transit, studied available plans and proposals, and attended publicized meetings at the local, regional and state level. Now that the project seems to have reached a critical stage, the town has retained H2M Group and Urbana Consulting, transportation consultants, to assist the town in analyzing the impacts of the various NJ Transit proposals and advise on how Leonia can best protect its interests. They will also assist in reviewing the DEIS and providing comments during the public comment period. Concerned residents on the Mayor's Committee on Transportation have also spent a number of years monitoring this project and helping to assist the Mayor, the Borough Council and residents in understanding the impacts and issues associated with light rail. Current members are Adrienne Albanese, Matthew Brennan, Ingrid Brennan, Frank Livelli, Barbara Marchant, and Vanessa Marks.

Why is it important for our town to take action now?

New Jersey Transit is currently finalizing the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) which is expected to be released for public review in the beginning of 2010. Leonia needs to determine its priorities and seek to press NJT to accept as many of them as possible prior to the release of the DEIS in order to obtain the best possible outcome for Leonia. The Borough could use this opportunity to request various modifications, such as desired station design features, and seek to have NJT agree to mitigate as many of the negative impacts as possible.

Absent a lack of funding, it appears that light rail will be coming to Leonia. Failure to seek improvements from NJ Transit at this point will likely result in a less favorable development plan for Leonia than would otherwise be the case. NJT has the power of condemnation (i.e., eminent domain), and Bergen County can allow parking and station development in Overpeck Park, land over which Leonia has no control.

What is currently planned for Leonia?

Over the years, NJ Transit's designs for a station and parking in Leonia have changed many times during the planning process. To date, a final station design or location has not yet been revealed. From the concept designs that have been released thus far, it is clear that NJ Transit intends to build the station near the intersection of the rail line and Ft. Lee Road (on the border of Station Park and Overpeck Park). The concept proposals have also shown parking areas ranging from between 550 and 700 spaces. This is a larger parking capacity than at all other planned stations along the Northern Branch due to the proximity of the major Route 80/95 Leonia exit. Based on previous meetings with the Borough, NJ Transit has indicated that it would consider constructing a parking garage (instead of a far larger surface parking design) to reduce the physical footprint of the proposed parking facilities. (Note: Some of the designs on the NJT website are out-of-date, such as the large 700-space parking lot shown for Overpeck Park).

Can Leonia simply refuse to have light rail service and parking?

Leonia could try to reject a light rail station and parking development. However, as a State agency, NJ Transit has the power and authority to impose a light rail station and parking in Leonia; it could also use the power of state condemnation to acquire public or private land for light rail and impose any design it favors. However, NJ Transit prefers to work with local communities in developing projects that try to address local concerns. Still, NJ Transit is only likely to make compromises or changes that are not inconsistent with the overall goals of the project. For example, if Leonia were to vigorously oppose light rail, it is possible that NJ Transit could impose its own preferred station and parking design. Another potential but far less likely outcome is that NJ Transit could simply refuse to put a station in Leonia. In this event, our community would have the burden of frequent commuter trains going through our town, and the added traffic impacts of frequent gate closings at Ft. Lee Road, but without the transit option that a Leonia station would offer or the increase in nearby property values.

Can the rail line be routed around Leonia (e.g., along Route 95)?

No, the project has always been predicated on using the existing rail line right-of-way (“ROW”). The only route that has ever been under consideration is along the existing ROW.

What are the possible locations for a Leonia Station?

South of Fort Lee Road

Two years ago, NJ Transit proposed that Leonia’s station be located along the rail line just south of Ft. Lee Road, at the border of Station Park and Overpeck Park. This linear station platform would be placed at or near the location of the historic Station Park rail station. It would have the advantage of allowing Leonians to have a commuter drop off/pedestrian access to the Station Park side of the platform. If commuter parking is also placed on the south side of Ft. Lee Road (see discussion below), it would allow for an efficient right-hand turn into the parking area for commuters coming from Route 95. The disadvantages to this location are that, alone or with parking facilities, a rail platform here will impact both Station Park and south side of Overpeck Park. In addition, the planned new two-lane road in the park, between the east and west sides of the park, could entice drivers to use this road as a cut-through from Route 46 and the west side of Overpeck Park.

North of Fort Lee Road

Moving the station to the north side of Ft. Lee Road would protect Station Park and the south side of Overpeck Park from development and could incorporate north-side parking possibilities (see parking discussion below). The disadvantages would include impacts to the north side of Overpeck Park. Furthermore, commuters dropped off at Station Park would have to cross Ft. Lee Road.

Other locations

Other Leonia station/parking locations have been explored in the past, including at the border of Palisades Park and on the border of Englewood beneath Route 95, but it seems clear that these alternatives are not feasible because of their close proximity to other planned stations, the inability to obtain NJ Turnpike access, and the added traffic burdens to local roads from commuters driving through town to access these alternatives.

What type of crossing (at grade or elevated) should there be at Ft. Lee Road?

It may be possible for Leonia to advocate for an elevated track by-pass that goes *over* Ft. Lee Road. The track would rise to an elevated crossing/station platform before returning to meet the freight rail line on the other side of Ft. Lee Road. Such a grade-separation has the advantages of eliminating the increased traffic congestion that a grade crossing would produce on Ft. Lee Road and simultaneously reduce risks to pedestrians. However, this would require a large expensive structure (potentially 30 feet high from the road to the light rail catenary wires and many blocks long), and require more park land than a grade crossing. It would also change the visual appearance of Station Park/Overpeck Park and the west entrance to our town.

A crossing at grade is the current NJ Transit plan design, which would have less visual and physical impact. However, a crossing at grade would also have greater traffic interruptions and impacts (NJ Transit estimates that gates will be down for 60 – 80 seconds as each train passes), including emergency access to hospitals. A grade level crossing also raises questions concerning pedestrian risks, county/town liability and responsibility for costs to maintain quiet-zone infrastructure (see below).

What about train whistles?

A grade separation (elevated crossing) would eliminate frequent train whistles during commuting hours. However, establishment of a Federal Railroad Administration “quiet zone” would also eliminate whistles at a much lower cost. A quiet zone is a section of rail line where alternative safety measures have been put in place to waive the requirement that trains blow horns. Final regulations for the new program were adopted in 2007. Mitigating measures include “quad gates” to prevent vehicles from by-passing single crossing gates and channelized roadways. Other towns along the Northern Branch are pursuing “quiet zone” crossings. Since Ft. Lee Road is a County road, Bergen County would have the lead in preparing an application. NJ Transit will work with the County and municipalities in preparing the applications and has agreed to pick up all of the capital costs of the supplementary safety measures as described above. There is no guarantee that a “quiet zone” application would be granted.

What about parking?

While numerous parking proposals have been discussed, it would appear that there are only four or five realistic alternatives for the planned Leonia Station. NJ Transit requires

that parking be in close proximity to the station, and therefore must be located at or near the intersection of Ft. Lee Road and the existing rail line (i.e., at one of the four corners of that intersection). These alternatives are: (1) no parking; (2) at Station Park (town-owned); (3) on the south side of Overpeck Park adjacent to Station Park; (4) on the north side of Overpeck Park (Henry Hoebel Section), chiefly on town-owned land; (5) on private property (e.g., on the parking lot behind the Kulite offices). Each option is discussed below:

(1) No Parking (a “kiss and drop” design with mass transit links). This would be the “greenest,” low impact solution and involve the lowest cost. This will not likely be acceptable to NJ Transit which has always insisted on parking facilities. As previously mentioned, NJT is particularly interested in parking at this location because of the convenient access to I-80/I-95. If Leonia takes this stance, NJT could follow through with a threat to bypass Leonia or impose its own preferred station and parking design on our town.

(2) Parking in Station Park (SE quadrant of tracks and Ft. Lee Road). This concept would develop Station Park as a transit center with stores, restaurants and other tax ratable-generating uses. This alternative would provide tax relief; commuter parking; would dovetail with a South-of-Ft.-Lee-Road station design; and spur further commercial development of the Grand Avenue area. However, it would fundamentally and adversely affect Station Park as a green space.

(3) Overpeck Park South of Ft Lee Road (SW quadrant). Recent drawings by NJ Transit show a planned new access road and traffic circle connecting the east and west side of Overpeck Park. It will result in a cut off section of land adjoining Ft. Lee Road and Station Park. A parking garage located in this area would work well with a south side station. Traffic coming in from 80/95 on the west would never enter Leonia. This would also allow Station Park to be used as a Kiss and Drop location. The disadvantages would include a loss of parkland and aesthetic impacts to Station Park. Leonia would not get any tax ratable benefits from this location.

(4) Overpeck Park North of Ft. Lee Road (Henry Hoebel – NW quadrant). Since Leonia owns a parcel of land at the corner of Overpeck Park and Ft. Lee Road, a parking garage can be built chiefly on Leonia land offering us the potential of sale income or income from a long term ground lease. This alternative would protect Overpeck Park South and Station Park. It may also be possible to make this part of adjacent private facilities on private land (e.g., the Kulite lot). Commuter traffic from the west would not enter Leonia.

(5) Private property alternatives (NE quadrant). NJ Transit may negotiate with Kulite to build a parking garage on the existing lot behind its offices. This alternative would not result in any loss of parkland; the lot is set back from Ft. Lee Road resulting in less visual impact. Leonia has no input into this possible solution and would obtain only the existing baseline tax revenues from the Kulite facility. Traffic would have to enter town and make a left hand turn to use such a facility. This alternative would have adverse impacts to North side of the park; traffic from Routes 80/95 would have to turn left to access the

facility and would likely include road widening and traffic reconfiguration affecting Willow Tree Road and access to the High School.

Related Issues:

Regarding Options 2 and 4 above, since Leonia now owns all or part of these properties, it could also seek to reserve a portion of monthly permit parking spaces for its residents. In parking options where Leonia does not own land (e.g., the Kulite quadrant in Option 5), NJ Transit cannot reserve some parking spaces for local residents (a statewide precedent issue). Also, Options 2 and 4 may allow for a land trade with NJ Transit and the potential for development of parkland with sports facilities for Leonia residents behind the DPW facility.

All options would be compatible with seeking a pedestrian overpass or grade crossing to allow Leonia High Students to access sports facilities in Overpeck Park.

Two closing observations on parking issues: Locations for station and parking are interrelated; each affects the other. Whether or not Leonia owns the parkland in question, the loss of parkland in three of the four above options could be partially mitigated through funded replacement of parkland elsewhere; although the replacement locations would not mitigate the aesthetic impacts caused by the loss of parkland at the entrance to our town.

What are the next steps for Leonia?

Residents need to evaluate the range of possible alternatives currently under consideration and make their preferences known to town officials. Our elected representatives need to formulate a negotiating position based on this input, and their own knowledge and judgment, before meeting with NJ Transit officials to press for features that are important to our community. These might include: the design of the station platform and road crossing; parking; high school pedestrian access to athletic facilities in Overpeck Park; community improvements to offset the impacts of light rail and increased traffic; and other features to mitigate adverse impacts on our quality of life. The overall goal is to achieve the best possible light rail design for our community.