

Leonia Transportation Committee Light Rail DEIS Report to Mayor and Council

Overall Findings and Recommendation: The Leonia Transportation Committee (“LTC”), a Mayor’s advisory committee, has reviewed the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (“DEIS”) for the Bergen Hudson Light Rail Project (“Project”) and, after carefully weighing the positive and adverse impacts it would have on Leonia, believes that the overall Project will be greatly beneficial to Leonia in the long run. We strongly support the Project. While we believe Leonia must seek revisions to the DEIS to mitigate some of the adverse impacts to our town (as discussed below), we believe the town should support this transportation alternative as an economic engine for our future and a means to mitigate the biggest environmental impact Leonia will face in the coming decades: a relentless increase in automobile congestion in our community and the resulting gridlock, pollution, pedestrian hazards and overall impairment of our quality of life that will result from this threat.

(1). STATION DESIGN/HIGHWAY ACCESS:

3.2.6 pg 3-8: The Leonia Transportation Committee recommends a green multi-modal bus-to-rail ‘kiss and drop’ Leonia station design without a large parking structure of any sort. This station would be served by mass transit links through existing and added bus routes.

In addition, we recommend a new exit off Route 95 directly onto Nordhoff Place in Englewood. This new exit is accessed via the extension of the existing I95 marginal road. This new access will also provide accessibility from DeGraw Avenue, Fort Lee Road, I95 and I80. This exit links up with the Englewood Route 4 parking facility. This would give riders direct access to the Route 4 station parking lot, which would be expanded to accommodate the increased ridership. It would follow this route:



This would give the light rail project increased ridership, provide direct highway access to the light rail from Routes 80, 95 and 4, mitigate truck and car traffic on Fort Lee Road and Grand Avenue, protect open space in Overpeck Park and allow for the future development of Leonia DPW lands as a favored Transit Village. This is a sensible and forward-looking public policy solution.

We have the following additional recommendations concerning the DEIS which apply to any acceptable Leonia design:

(2). QUIET ZONES

- A. **12.3.5.2, pg 12-23:** “Since most of the severe impacts are caused by warning whistles, it is recommended that Leonia request a “Quiet Zone” to cover the grade crossing at Fort Lee Road, the pedestrian crossing at Leonia High School, and at Brookside Avenue in Englewood.”
- B. **12.2.4 9, pg 12-7:** “NJ TRANSIT would assist the municipalities during the process and would pay for the design and installation of the Quiet Zones.”

Recommendation:

Quiet Zone designation from the Federal Railroad Administration is essential to mitigate the adverse impacts of this Project. Affected communities must apply for Quiet Zones; neither NJT nor the FTA will assist in this effort. Once designation is obtained, NJT will financially support the infrastructure to support this designation. We recommend that Leonia's Mayor and Council seek and secure Quiet Zone designations at the earliest opportunity by taking the following steps:

- 1. Pass a resolution to request Bergen County to file a notice of intent with the FRA for Quiet Zone designation.
- 2. Coordinate with Bergen County and other affected towns to make a joint application for Quiet Zone designation covering the entire Northern Branch Project.
- 3. The Borough should take all necessary steps to ensure successful Quiet Zone designations for Leonia and the participating Northern Branch towns.

(3) PARKING

- A. **3.2.6, pg 3-8:** “Station parking for 550 vehicles would be accommodated in a six-story parking deck located above an existing parking lot associated with an office building (Kulite) located at Block 801 in a commercial/industrial area east of the Northern Branch right-of-way.”
- B. **5.3.5.2, pg 5 12-13, Figure 5-6:** “NJ Transit proposed the acquisition of the “air rights” associated with the existing parking lot, which would allow the existing parking lot to remain in place and in use by the owner of the building, Kulite, for its current employees, while providing parking for Northern Branch passengers on the upper floors of the parking desk.”
- C. **7.3.5.2, pg 7-13:** No open space or recreational resources will be acquired to develop the station site and parking.”

- D. **25.2, pg 25-1:** "Section 4(f) of the U.S. Department of Transportation Act of 1966 as amended stipulates that Federally-funded or approved transportation projects may not use land from a publicly-owned park, recreation area, wildlife or waterfowl refuge, or from a historic site of national, state, or local significance, unless a determination is made that there is no feasible or prudent alternative to the use of the land from the property."
- E. **27. 3.9, pg 27-10:** " Activities to construct the second track and the catenary may include pile driving, sheeting, excavation, and compaction."

Recommendation:

The Leonia Transportation Committee favors a green multi-modal bus-to-rail 'kiss and drop' station design without large parking structures. This station would be served by mass transit links through existing and added bus routes and enhanced pedestrian access (vide supra).

It is clear to us that Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act prevents using federal funds to take parkland for parking lots or for parking lot access roadways where "prudent and feasible" alternatives exist. Most importantly, we regard our parklands as a scarce and precious community resource; preserving this inheritance is crucial to our future quality of life. We believe it is our collective obligation to act as stewards and to protect this resource for future generations.

Although, NJT has the requisite legal authority to condemn and take the air rights over Kulite's parking lot, we do not support this approach. Kulite is a valued member of our community and according to Kulite management the vibration during construction of a parking structure would require them to cease operations in Leonia.

Finally, we recommend that the Mayor and Council pursue alternative parking facilities for Leonia residents.

(4) PEDESTRIAN SAFETY

9.2.2.5, pg 9-15, Table 9-6: "This would cause all peak hours to be a Level of Service (LOS) "F" for both Build Alternatives."

Recommendation:

A. General:

Leonia is a small borough located at critical crossroads in New Jersey and the entrance to New York City. There is excessive traffic congestion in our borough daily. We strongly believe that, over time as traffic congestion increases, our residents would increasingly favor walking or biking to the rail station. We recommend that Leonia ensure that NJ Transit provide pedestrian infrastructure to secure safe crossings, and adequate sidewalks and bike paths. Under the proposed design, the traffic LOS "F" rating anticipated at the intersections of (i) Fort Lee Road and Willow Tree Road, and (ii) Station Parkway and Grand Avenue will increase pedestrian risks.

B. Leonia Station Platform: The planned southbound platform is south of Fort Lee Road; the planned northbound platform is north of Fort Lee Road

3.2.6, pg 3-8: "The Leonia Station is proposed north of Fort Lee Road, east of the right-of-way. The track crossing for pedestrians and vehicles would be at Fort Lee Road", " A bus drop-off area would be located on Fort Lee Road." NJT proposes "cut out" bus stops for eastbound and westbound routes with bus transfers to the light rail on the north and south side of Fort Lee Road (**3.2.6**). Based on the anticipated number of bus transfers (**10.3.2.2-Light Rail to Tenafly = 1,690 bus transfers, pg 10-7, paragraph 2 or 10.3.2.3-Light Rail to Englewood=2,340 bus transfers, pg 10-9, paragraph 1**) at Leonia Station to Light Rail.

Recommendation:

The Light Rail survey conducted in Leonia indicates that a large percentage of Leonians would prefer to walk to the Leonia Station. To encourage and accommodate pedestrian and bike use, and to ensure safety and efficient pedestrian traffic flow, we recommend the following mitigating steps not currently included in the DEIS:

1. **Locate both platforms south of Fort Lee Road** to help mitigate the negative impact on Kulite.
2. **Design a light rail station with a centrally placed platform.**
3. Apply "Complete the Streets" standards to all aspects of this (and every) NJT transportation project, including but not limited to pedestrian and bike lanes and crossings – across the tracks (east and west) at Fort Lee Road and pedestrian and bike lanes and crossings - across Fort Lee Road (north and south) at Willow Tree Road.

C. Leonia High School Pedestrian

3.2.6, pg 3-8: "At the pedestrian crossing at the high school, pedestrian gates and flashers would be installed, as well as fencing of adjacent right-of-way, and removal of adjacent vegetation."

8.3.6, pg 8-12- 8-15: "The school's athletic fields are adjacent to the right-of-way....In addition, students utilize facilities in Overpeck County Park with students crossing the right-of-way at an unprotected pedestrian crossing."

22.3.5.2, pg 22-10: "Grade crossing protection consisting of pedestrian gates, signals, signage, and adjacent fencing would be installed..."

Recommendation:

Leonias High School (LHS) is located adjacent to and on the east of the right-of-way of the proposed Northern Corridor Branch. LHS has 704 students, including 99 special education students with disabilities. LHS students cross these tracks to reach their sports facilities in Overpeck Park. All year long there is continuous movement across the tracks. To accommodate our pedestrian students and staff and ensure their safety we will require a **high gated, wide ADA compliant pedestrian bridge** that allows large groups of students/teams to cross safely without the delay of class time. We also recommend extending the safety fencing north to Ray Avenue and south to Schor Avenue.

D. Fort Lee Road

Figure 9-10: Leonia Station Mitigated Built Conditions

Recommendation:

Increased traffic makes it imperative we accommodate and enhance pedestrian and bike pathways. The DEIS plan eliminates sidewalk on the south side of Fort Lee Road between Station Parkway and Spring Street. The portions of the DEIS addressing Leonia fail to address the safety and convenience of people who walk or use means other than automobiles. We recommend NJT apply "Complete the Streets" standards to the design of road and pathways that provides for safe, convenient, attractive and adequate sidewalks and bicycles lanes.

E. Englewood Route 4 Station

9.2.2.6, pg 9-18, Figure 9-13: "Nordhoff Place carries local traffic, running parallel to the railroad alignment until it veers west after crossing under State Route 4."

Recommendation:

There are no accommodations for pedestrian or bike access from the north part of Leonia to the Englewood Route 4 Station. Because accommodations of pedestrian safety and flow are not included in the DEIS, we recommend applying "Complete the Streets" standards for safe, convenient, attractive and adequate sidewalks and bicycles access.

(5) TRAFFIC IMPACTS

A. Traffic Impacts to Willow Tree Road

Moving the platform station to south of Fort Lee Road eliminates most traffic concerns with regard to Willow Tree Road and access to the Leonia High School.

While we do not favor the DEIS plan to build a parking garage on Kulite property, if NJT proceeds under the proposed DEIS design, we recommend that NJT provide the following to mitigate adverse impacts to LHS students and staff:

1. Alternative vehicular access routes to Leonia High School, possibly along the rail right-of-way. This will reduce risks and mitigate adverse impacts to walking school children, school-related traffic and transit users and to Leonia residents and visitors.
2. Install pedestrian sidewalks and bike lanes along Willow Tree Road. Include bicycle lanes and designated pedestrian paths to the stations, to the school and to the park areas.

B. Traffic Impacts at Grand Avenue and Fort Lee Road

9.2.2.5 pg 9-15- 9-17, Figure 9-10: "Fort Lee Road is a major east-west roadway through Leonia...Fort Lee Road and Grand Avenue is a major intersection of two primary arterials. Fort Lee Road is the east-west route and Grand Avenue is the north-south route that carries about 1300 vehicles in each direction in the AM and in the PM peak hours."

The traffic mitigation in the DEIS anticipates a change from two lanes to a single lane between the intersections of Fort Lee Road and Station Parkway and Fort Lee Road and Grand Avenue near Spring Street.

Recommendation:

Because the DEIS does not sufficiently address these impacts we recommend the following mitigation steps: It is not necessary to widen Fort Lee Road. The **two-lane configuration** of Fort Lee Road eastbound should be maintained all the way between Station Parkway and Grand Avenue. The westbound Fort Lee Road should also maintain a two-lane configuration. At the intersection of Fort Lee Road and Station Parkway, a left turn signal and turning lane should be included to facilitate traffic onto Station Parkway.

C. Traffic Impacts to Station Parkway:

9.2.2.5 pg 9-15- 9-17, Figure 9-10: “ Fort Lee Road is a major east-west roadway through Leonia...Fort Lee Road and Grand Avenue is a major intersection of two primary arterials. Fort Lee Road is the east-west route and Grand Avenue is the north-south route that carries about 1300 vehicles in each direction in the AM and in the PM peak hours

Recommendations:

Leonia has conducted traffic studies of the Station Parkway/Grand Avenue intersection, currently a right hand only turn without any traffic lights. Today it is one of Leonia's most dangerous intersections for vehicles and pedestrians; it is exceptionally difficult for school children to cross in the morning. This is a residential area and the Leonia Transit Survey indicates that many Leonia residents will walk to the proposed station and many will have to cross this intersection. Because of the impacts of the proposed project on this intersection, the following mitigating steps are recommended to ensure pedestrian safety and vehicular flow at this intersection:

1. The **addition of a traffic light at the Grand Avenue/Station Parkway intersection** with adequate signaled pedestrian crossings.
2. The additions of sidewalks and bike lanes along the length Station Parkway

(6) EMERGENCY SERVICES

8.3.6.2, pg 8-14-8-15: “It is anticipated that existing police and fire safety resources would be sufficient to safely and efficiently provide police and fire protection to the municipality. As a result, it is unlikely that there would be a significant increased demand for emergency protection and community resources.”

22.1.2: “All station areas will be patrolled by NJ Transit police who will work in concert with local police jurisdictions....stations will be equipped with lighting and video surveillance (TVMs pg 22-11), monitored by NJTransit.”

8.3.6 Police

Recommendation:

To mitigate adverse security impacts: provide the Leonia Police Department with access to the TVM video surveillance of Leonia Station and electronic means to override Fort Lee Road

signals in the event of an emergency. Note: Please update the following in Section 8.3.6, Police:
Police Officers = 17; Civilian Staff = 0; Police Cars = 10; Motorcycles = 0

8.3.6 Fire and EMS

In order to traverse the right-of-way, Fire Department and other emergency vehicles use the Fort Lee Road grade crossing.

Recommendation:

To mitigate the adverse impacts of the crossing we recommend that The Leonia Fire Department and emergency vehicles be provided with authorization and electronic means to override Ft. Lee Road signals in the event of an emergency.

(7) NOISE

12.3.5, Table 12-3: “ [R]esidences located very close to the right-of-way, namely the townhouses south of Station Parkway, would experience wayside noise associated with freight train pass-bys during the quiet night time hours. The combined effect of the light rail and freight horn noise and the freight wayside noise results in a total impact of 144 residences, of which 52 residences would experience a severe impact.”

Recommendation:

In addition to the Quiet Zone designation, NJ Transit should plant dense evergreen trees to provide a year-round visual and noise buffer between the rail line and Meadowview Courts and the rail line and Lakeview Condominiums.

In summary, we enthusiastically support the restoration of passenger service on the Northern Branch contingent upon the inclusion of the foregoing mitigation measures in the final design.

Thank you for your attention to this matter,

Leonia Transportation Committee Members
Ingrid Brennan – Chair
Adrienne Albanese
Matthew Brennan
Carlos DeSantis
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Frank Livelli
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Chris Terzini
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