

Commuter Rail

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Introduction

Within the past several decades, many discussions and considerations have occurred surrounding the Lackawanna Cut-Off Rail Restoration Project – which includes development of a commuter rail line running from the Poconos region of Pennsylvania to Hoboken, New Jersey, where a transfer line will take passengers into Manhattan. Although the project was originally envisioned to begin service in 2007,¹ the State of New Jersey and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania have been collaborating to secure funds to secure a commuter rail line that will provide commuters with quick and easy access to the New York Metro Area and relieve highway congestion.²

Although service is not thought to be restored until 2014, project plans now include new train stations and parking facilities in Pennsylvania, including Scranton, Tobyhanna, rural Coolbaugh Township, Analomink, East Stroudsburg and Delaware Water Gap; plans also include a maintenance facility in Scranton. New Jersey plans to add stations in Blairstown and Andover, with a maintenance facility in Grendell, NJ.³ Currently, the project is applying for \$551 million in federal funds needed to rebuild the service, including new tracks and stations.⁴

The Lackawanna Cut-off Rail Restoration Project's purpose is to effectively and efficiently put into operation a passenger rail service, improving travel in the Northeast Pennsylvania/Northwest New Jersey to Midtown Manhattan and Hoboken, NJ. The project will benefit the region's economy by offering a new modal option for commuters and travelers, improve access to employment opportunities, and allow the region to positively address its existing travel concerns, estimated population growth, and environmental issues surrounding vehicle emissions.⁵

The Envisioned Project

As stated in the passenger train's environmental assessment, service restoration of the Lackawanna Cut-Off Project will use an existing 133 miles of out-of-service rail right-of-way between Scranton and Midtown Manhattan, NY, and Hoboken, NJ. Consisting of two services, the envisioned project will include service from Scranton to Hoboken and from Andover, NJ, to Penn Station, in Manhattan. The 45 miles of rail from Port Morris, NJ, to Midtown Manhattan/Hoboken comprises the Morris & Essex and Montclair-Boonton Lines, a passenger train service operated by New Jersey TRANSIT. The Lackawanna Cut-Off Project will extend some of the existing train service west, from Port Morris to Scranton or Andover, NJ. Trains will run from Scranton to Hoboken as a single service pattern, while trains from Andover to Midtown Manhattan will comprise another service pattern.⁶

The current project is envisioned to reconstruct a single track commuter rail line with stations on 88 miles of track between Scranton and Port Morris (Port Morris is not a train stop). The Minimal Operable Segment (MOS) of the project has been proposed and provides for the restoration of commuter rail service for 52.3 miles in New Jersey - between Andover and Hoboken. Stations along the Lackawanna Cut-off Line will be located in Scranton, Tobyhanna, Pocono Mountain, Analomink, East Stroudsburg, and the Delaware Water Gap Visitors Center in Pennsylvania – a total of 60 miles. Stops in New Jersey will be at Blairstown and Andover. Scranton will house the overnight train storage yard. A maintenance-of-way facility will be located in Grendell, NJ. The currently operating NJ Transit line between Hoboken and Port Morris will be extended west from Port Morris, to reach Scranton.⁷

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Service	Infrastructure	Improvements	Distance (Miles)
Hoboken to Port Morris	Existing	None	45
Port Morris to Delaware River Bridge	Extend	Stations, Manteca right-of-way facility, track reinstallation	28
Delaware River Bridge to Scranton	Extend	Stations, yard, track upgrade	60
All			133

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Hoboken to Port Morris	Existing	None	45
Port Morris to Andover	Extend	Station, track reinstallation	7.3
All			52.3

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Scranton's station will be located near Steamtown National Historic Site and Lackawanna Avenue, just east of the Lackawanna Railroad Bridge and of the Cliff Street underpass. Parking will be incorporated into the existing parking facilities - building 30 additional surface spaces.¹⁰

The Tobyhanna station site will be located in Coolbaugh Township next to the old station with access from Church Street. A 102-space parking lot will be added. The Pennsylvania Northeast Regional Railroad Authority already owns the property to start reconstruction.¹¹

The Pocono Mountain station in Coolbaugh Township will be built northwest of Arcadia North Business Park on part of the former Tegawitha Summer Camp and is anticipated to be the new line's busiest station. Plans include building a 1,000-space surface parking lot. Access will be from Route 611 via Pocono Municipal/Mount Pocono Road.¹²

The Analomink station will include two parcels near Routes 447 and 191, which are owned by the PA Department of Transportation and Stroud Township. Plans for parking include a 250-space lot.¹³

The East Stroudsburg station will be located south of the old station, which has been turned into the Dansbury Depot Restaurant. A 228-space lot with access from Crystal and Bridge Streets is currently under development.¹⁴

The Delaware Water Gap station will be south of the River Road intersection, close to the Interstate 80 Pennsylvania Welcome Center at Delaware Water Gap. Parking will involve a five-level parking garage that would modify the current park-and-ride lot, and is predicted to include about 900 spaces. Plans include improving access for pedestrians along the road. Access to this station will be from River Road.¹⁵¹⁶

The Blirstown station in New Jersey is located on Hope Road. A 243-space lot will be situated at the site, which is currently under private ownership.¹⁷

The Andover station is to be located on the south side of Roseville Road, intersecting with Andover Mohawk Road. The site is entirely undeveloped and sits on the rail right-of-way. A 125-space parking lot is planned.¹⁸

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During weekday peak hours, the trains will operate on about 45-minute headways, and during off peak hours it will operate on two to three hour headways. According to an environment assessment prepared by the U.S. Department of Transportation and the New Jersey Transit, no weekend service is assumed. From Scranton to Hoboken, there will be nine eastbound and nine westbound trains per day; from Andover to Penn Station New York there will be 10 eastbound and 11 westbound trains per day. Approximately 52.3 miles between Andover and Hoboken will be restored for commuter rail service, with plans to operate eight eastbound and eight westbound trains per day between the New Jersey towns. Entirely new track will be constructed on a 7.3 mile segment from Port Morris to Andover.¹⁹

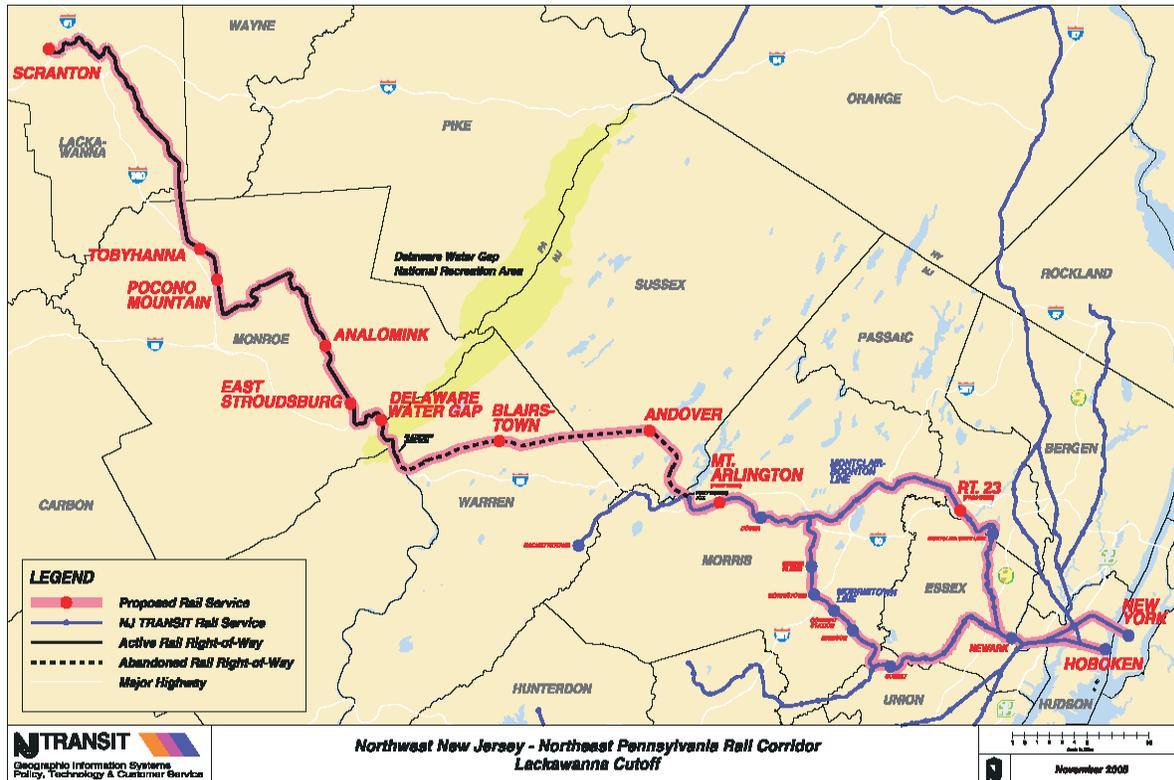
The new passenger rail line will operate diesel locomotives that depart 45 minutes apart during peak hours, and which reach speeds of 70mph. According to the environmental assessment, the first train of the day will depart from Scranton at 4 a.m. and the last will return to Scranton at 1 a.m. There will be just 40 daily bookings from Scranton, and a trip to Hoboken will take 3 hours and 20 minutes.²⁰ NJ Transit estimates that 3,350 passengers will ride the commuter train eastbound daily.²¹

Also predicted is the daily eastbound boarding from Tobyhanna, which is estimated to have 150 passengers taking 2 hours and 43 minutes to Hoboken; Pocono Mountain is estimated to have 1,040 passengers taking 2 hours and 38 minutes; Analomink is estimated to have 250 passengers taking 2 hours and 12 minutes; East Stroudsburg is estimated to have 460 passengers taking 2 hours and 6 minutes; and Delaware Water Gap is estimated to have 980 passengers taking 1 hour and 58 minutes to reach Hoboken. On the New Jersey side of the tracks, 280 are expected to board in Blairstown and another 150 in Andover. The trip from Andover to Hoboken is expected to take about 90 minutes.

In order to complete all of the planned stations and facilities, the New Jersey Transit must acquire eleven properties. The NJ Transit and the Pennsylvania Northeast Railroad Authority already own all rights-of-way.²²

Weekday Eastbound Predicted Ridership, 2030²³

Station	Total Eastbound Riders	A.M. Peak Eastbound Riders	Off Peak and PM Eastbound Riders
Scranton	40	35	5
Tobyhanna	150	140	10
Pocono Mountain	1,040	960	80
Analomink	250	235	15
East Stroudsburg	460	420	40
Delaware Water Gap	980	890	90
Blairstown	280	280	0
Andover	150	140	10
Total for Lackawanna Line	3,350	3,100	250
Additional Riders on NJ Transit Line	170	150	20
Total for Entire Project	3,520	3,250	270



Source: U.S. Department of Transportation

Potential Expenses, Plans, and Status

The entire project would feature a 133-mile passenger and freight line from Scranton to Hoboken, costing an estimate of \$551 million. With the environmental assessment complete, conceptual design in progress, and possible construction beginning within five years, the only problem that remains is funding.²⁴ The state of New Jersey is assumed to run the service at a cost of approximately \$26 million annually, while running a \$12 million deficit.²⁵ Pennsylvania and New Jersey officials have not yet agreed on who will run the service or how expenses will be covered.²⁶

Expenses will include buying a yard for NJ Transit equipment in Scranton along with new rolling stock. Eight stations and parking lots will need to be constructed, railroad tracks and signals upgraded, and, in the some places in NJ and PA, track re-laid. NJ expenses also include repairing historic viaducts and a tunnel.²⁷

Approximately 28 miles of track in the section between Blairstown and Andover must be laid in order to connect Blairstown with Andover. With the environmental finding of “no significant environmental impact,” New Jersey has moved one step further and allocated \$37 million to build 7.3 miles of rail between Port Morris and Andover.²⁸ The New Jersey Legislature also approved another \$2.94 million for the project to include restoration of the Lackawanna Cutoff.²⁹

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Build Alternative Capital Costs -Cost Item Total (millions, 2006 dollars)³⁰	
Track, Structures, Signals and Communications	\$191
Stations	\$41
Yard	\$14
Equipment	\$105
Environmental Mitigation / Land Acquisition	\$5
Soft Costs	\$90
Contingency	\$80
Overhead and Profit	\$25
TOTAL	\$551

Source: Edwards and Kelcey, 2006.

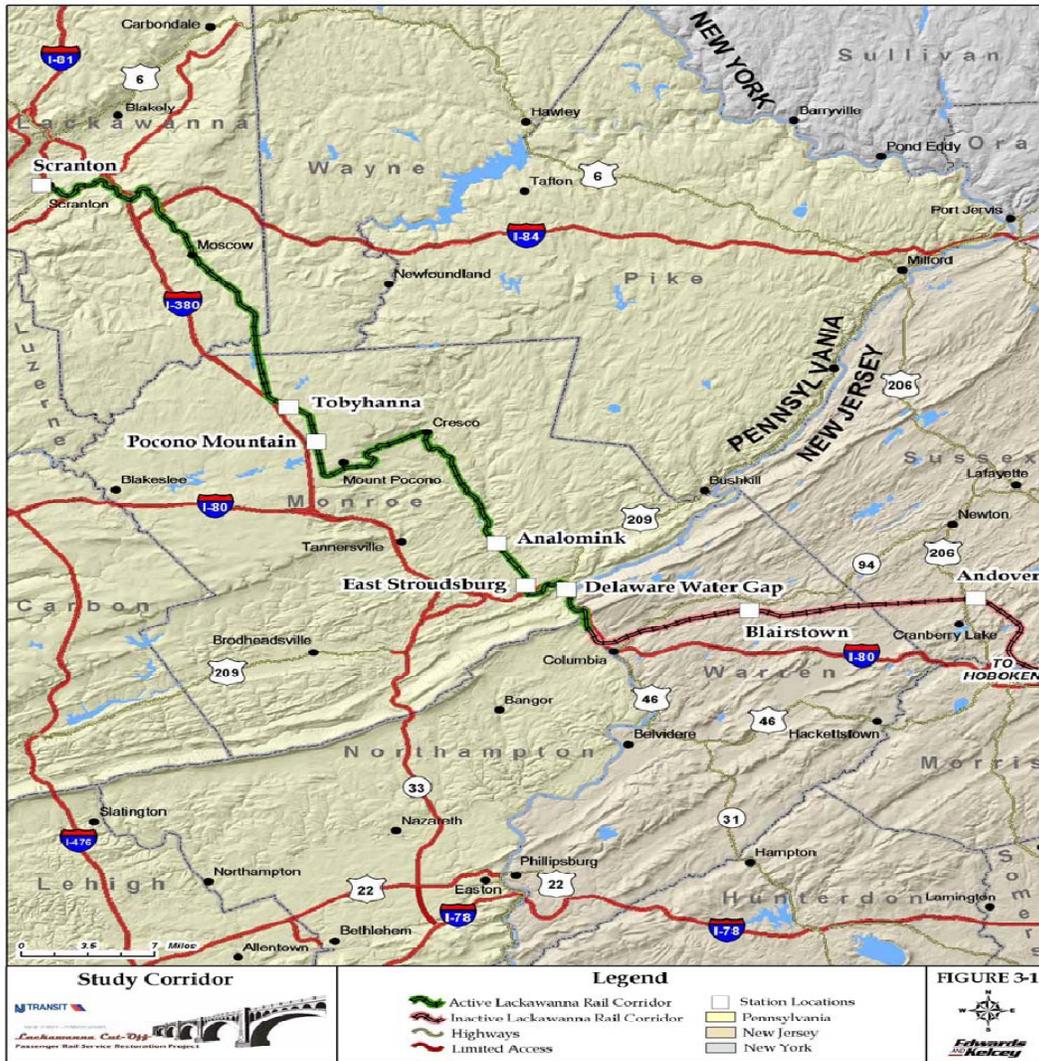
By 2001, the line from the Delaware Water Gap to Lake Hopatcong, N.J., was purchased for \$21 million. Pennsylvania secured the Delaware Railroad Bridge for \$4 million, as one of the first steps to attempt to restore the Lackawanna Cutoff Train. The service was abandoned in 1972, along with the tracks. Since then, there has been no commuter train into New Jersey/New York.³¹

Lackawanna County turned over its rail authority to Monroe County, creating a single organization stretching from Carbondale to Scranton through the Pocono region, extending east to East Stroudsburg and the Delaware Water Gap. As of May 2006, the single rail authority is called the Pennsylvania Northeast Regional Railroad Authority (PNRRA).^{32, 33} The major goal of the merger of the rail authorities is to successfully complete the restoration of rail commuter service between Scranton, the Pocono Region, New Jersey and New York City. Currently, as the main project sponsor for the Lackawanna Cutoff in Pennsylvania, the PNRRA is working with the New Jersey Transit, the project sponsor in New Jersey, to advance development as quickly as possible.³⁴

By 2006, \$20 million in federal funding was secured to begin preliminary engineering and to conduct studies on the rebuilding of the Lackawanna Cutoff Train. New Jersey and Pennsylvania each provided an additional \$40 million to begin the development of the passenger rail system. New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine set money aside for the transit project in a six-year budget to begin laying new track on the Lackawanna Cutoff, 27 miles of rail bed that runs from central New Jersey to near the Delaware River.³⁵

In July 2007, money to fund engineering work on the proposed Scranton to New York City rail link cleared the U.S. Senate's Appropriations Committee, which approved \$2 million in a Fiscal Year 2008 federal funding bill; before the bill is entirely passed, however, it must clear New Jersey's full Senate and House. The Lackawanna Cutoff project would include reconstruction of an abandoned rail right-of-way in New Jersey, and enhancements to existing track, including construction of commuter platforms at several locations.³⁶

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Source: U.S. Department of Transportation

Introduced by U.S. Senators John Kerry and Arlen Specter, The High Speed Rail for America Act of 2008 proposes development of high-speed rail by providing \$8 billion in tax exempt bonds, \$10 billion in tax credit bonds for super high-speed intercity rail facilities, and \$5.4 billion in tax credit bonds for rail infrastructure across the nation. However, none of that money is currently allocated for the commuter rail project in the Poconos. Now, however, with the Obama Administration in power, it is anticipated that more money will be allocated to the High-Speed Rail Act, and hopefully some will go towards the Lackawanna Cutoff Passenger Rail Restoration Project.³⁷ In addition, \$8 billion in stimulus funds is available for high speed rail. Pennsylvania will compete for newly available federal rail aid to assist the proposed Scranton-to-Hoboken commuter train project.³⁸

Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter believes the development of rail projects could reduce highway congestion, reduce dependence on foreign oil, improve the environment, and foster sound economic development, making this project a candidate for more federal support.³⁹ Other environmental benefits of rail service include producing 60% fewer CO₂ emissions and using 21% less energy than the average

automobile, while producing half as much greenhouse gas emissions and using 17% less energy than an airplane.⁴⁰

On March 23, 2009, during a White House interview, President Barack Obama said he is trying to build long-term economic growth in Northeast Pennsylvania and elsewhere with a change-oriented \$3.6 trillion proposed federal budget. According to President Obama, federal government spending to develop renewable energy sources, like wind power, and reduce reliance on foreign oil is a better approach to economic development than creating speculative wealth through housing market bubbles. The Scranton to New York City commuter train will help bring about the type of long-term economic development that the President is talking about. President Obama said projects like the long-sought Scranton commuter train will have a shot for federal funding when the next federal transportation funding bill is taken up by Congress.⁴¹

Population Growth and Highway Congestion Relief

Between 1990 and 2000, counties along the route of the Lackawanna Cutoff project have experienced a thirteen percent population growth. Populations in these areas of Pennsylvania and New Jersey are anticipated to grow another 23 percent by 2030. In just one decade, Pike County’s population increased by 65 percent, which Monroe County’s increased 45 percent, adding approximately 43,000 residents to the region. By 2030, it is anticipated that Monroe County’s population may double to 278,000 residents.⁴² Lackawanna County has been seeing positive net in-migration since 2002. Much of the growth is coming from counties in New York, New Jersey, and other parts of Pennsylvania.

About half of the residents who live around the area of the Lackawanna Cut-off project work outside their residing counties and rely on car or bus transportation.⁴³ With recent dramatic population growth, traffic on the commonly traveled Interstate 80 has become a problem. Between 1997 and 2002, traffic on the Delaware Bridge on Interstate 80 increased 19 percent, from 45,000 vehicles to 53,500 vehicles per day. The Northerly Crossing Corridor Congestion Mitigation Study, as stated in the project’s Environmental Assessment, estimates that morning peak hour volume will increase fifteen percent by 2010 and by an additional 46 percent between 2010 and 2030.⁴⁴

With more employment opportunities in Morris County, NJ, and in neighboring areas like New York City, Northeastern Pennsylvania residents commuting daily to work have caused highway congestion levels to increase. Within ten years, 3,000 more workers were found to have commuted to New York City daily, resulting in a 274 percent increase.⁴⁵

Commuting Growth Trends from Northeastern Pennsylvania*⁴⁶

Work County	1990	2000	1990-2000 (% Change)
Bergen, NJ	717	1,119	56.1%
Essex, NJ	854	1,353	58.4%
Hudson, NJ	411	738	79.6%
Morris, NJ	3,454	4,771	38.1%
Sussex, NJ	1,372	2,164	57.7%
Warren, NJ	1,187	1,635	37.7%
New York, NY	1,114	4,171	274.4%
Total	9,109	15,951	75.1%

* Includes Carbon, Lackawanna, Monroe, Pike and Wayne Counties
 Source: 1990 US Census; 2000 US Census

It is unlikely that 1-80, 1-78, or 1-84 will be widened. Another problem arises from the plan for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to accommodate more freighters, putting as many as 10,000 more trucks on these highways each day.⁴⁷ This project's ability to take vehicles off the road could help New Jersey to comply with the federal Clean Air Act, which must be accomplished by 2010; otherwise, the state could lose billions in federal highway funding. The development of the Lackawanna Cutoff train provides a realistic opportunity for highway congestion relief⁴⁸

Highway congestion predictions estimate that a four hour car ride to New York City on Interstate 80 is not far off.⁴⁹ U.S. Congressman Paul E. Kanjorski, of Nanticoke, PA, believes the New York metro area could grow by four million in the next two decades.⁵⁰

Possible Expansion into Binghamton, NY

As plans for the line continue to progress, consideration for the development of a passenger rail line connecting Scranton to Binghamton, NY, have also been addressed. Larry Malski, chief operating officer of the PNRRA, believes a connection to Syracuse with frequent stops could tie Scranton to the nationwide passenger rail system.⁵¹

Expanding the Scranton to Hoboken line into Binghamton, NY, could also help boost Northeastern Pennsylvania's hopes for a train service to New York City. Amtrak is soon to embark upon a study of extending its service through Scranton into Binghamton, and possibly as far north as Syracuse, NY. If Amtrak is to extend such service, the Scranton to Hoboken passenger rail project may be eligible for more federal funding for the \$550 million project, according to Mr. Malski.⁵² The New York State Department of Transportation and Amtrak have agreed to conduct a study of rail along the Interstate 81 corridor.⁵³

The study on the expansion into Binghamton is expected to take up to a year. Passenger rail service would run on existing tracks. This extension is viewed as a potential economic development tool and as a way to attract students to Binghamton University, most of whose student population is from northern New Jersey.⁵⁴

U.S. Senator Charles E. Schumer stated, "With Amtrak and NYSDOT on board, this vital project can move full speed ahead. It's terrific that they've agreed so quickly, and I'll continue to do all I can to get this train line charging forward. Establishing a consistent link to NYC for Binghamton residents will not only provide more transportation options for upstate travelers but will also boost economic prospects throughout the region."⁵⁵

Pennsylvania and New Jersey's efforts to return commuter based service between Scranton and Hoboken holds the likelihood of developing a link between Binghamton and New York City. The Binghamton-Scranton line would connect to the Lackawanna Cutoff Project, benefiting the project by providing riders with even more access.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Although slow, progress is being made on the rail restoration project. One of the main issues affecting the project is conflicting priorities among transportation agencies in three different states: Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York.⁵⁷ The project is estimated to cost about \$26 million annually, while running a \$12.3 million revenue shortfall.⁵⁸ Presently, the key missing piece is an agreement between the Pennsylvania and New Jersey governments on paying for the rail line restorations and the actual service, which is thought to take another two to three years. Until such agreement is reached, no one involved in the project believes construction and service restoration will advance beyond the 7.3 miles of track already being laid.⁵⁹

Currently, the Lackawanna Cutoff Project is in the hands of NJ Transit officials, who may or may not have Pennsylvania's best interests in mind. Northeastern Pennsylvania's Congressional Delegation is asking Gov. Ed Rendell to form an "impartial tri-state authority to overlook the future developments of the passenger rail service between Scranton and New York City because the delegation has alleged that only significant progress made to date has been within the state of New Jersey."⁶⁰ U.S. Senators Arlen Specter and Bob Casey, along with U.S. Representatives Chris Carney and Paul Kanjorski are calling for support from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, claiming a tri-state authority would "ensure that the Pennsylvania portion of the rail line continues to move forward in a timely fashion." Sen. Casey added, "The idea behind the formation of a tri-state authority is absolutely essential that the line extend all the way to Scranton."⁶¹

Money from the federal stimulus bill may be granted to benefit the project and possibly provide Pennsylvania with over \$80 million for rail modernization projects and \$233,190,181 for transit capital and operating assistance in urbanized areas, according to a statement from Casey's office. The Congressional Delegation has secured \$1 million for the project in awaiting the fiscal 2009 omnibus bill. This money will be added to the \$1.3 million secured in 2008 to finish the project's preliminary engineering and final design phases. Rep. Kanjorski indicated that \$10 billion from the federal government, allocated for transportation grants, high-speed projects and capital investments, is only for projects ready to be built, and "this project is not at such a stage." Unfortunately, New Jersey Transit has been slow to respond over the many years in which it has been the project's lead sponsor.⁶²

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