



New Jersey Association of Railroad Passengers

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NJ Transit Report Confirms Sharp Loss of Riders on Princeton Branch Following Station Abandonment

New Jersey Transit has acknowledged that last summer's abandonment of the historic Princeton Branch ("Dinky") station and establishment of a temporary terminus 1,200 feet farther away from Princeton's town center has sharply diminished ridership.

According to New Jersey Transit's Quarterly Ridership Trends Analysis Report for the Second Quarter, Fiscal Year 2014 (October through December 2013), the number of passengers who rode the Princeton Branch was

"-10.4% lower than last year, with all ticket types showing declines. Princeton-NY Penn travel was off -8.8%; Princeton-Newark -0.9%, with larger declines in local travel. The Dinky declines correspond with the start of free shuttle buses operated by Princeton University between Princeton and Princeton Jct. as the result of the temporary relocation of the Princeton station to facilitate construction there."

NJ Transit shut down the Station on August 26, 2013 to accommodate plans by Princeton University to build a second access drive to a University-owned employee-parking garage without creating a grade crossing over the track. The University plans are part of a \$300 million dollar "Arts and Transit" campus expansion project. NJ Transit's agreement to abandon its rights in the station complex will allow the University to incorporate the prime real estate into its campus and use portions of it for academic arts buildings. A wooden structure, located more than two-thirds of a mile from Princeton's Palmer Square, currently is serving as a temporary train station. It is to be replaced at a future date by a modern shelter-type station next to a larger convenience store to be located south of the new access drive to the parking garage. The University's project, including the abandonment of the historic station, has received strong support from Governor Chris Christie who is an ex officio member of the Princeton University Board of Trustees.

According to New Jersey Transit, ridership on its entire Northeast Corridor Line, of which the Princeton Branch is one element, increased by 10.4 percent, coincidentally the same amount of the decrease on the branch. NJT reported that its "2nd quarter was record-setting for the NEC with new quarterly highs in total passenger trips, average weekday passenger trips, average Saturday and average Sunday ridership." According to statisticians, this means that the effect of the large drop in passenger loadings on the Princeton Branch is likely worse than 10.4 percent. Had the station not been moved, it is probable that the branch's ridership would have increased by a percentage close to what the entire corridor experienced.

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“Put differently,” said Jack May of the New Jersey Association of Railroad Passengers (**NJ-ARP**), “the station abandonment and terminus relocation to a much less convenient site has dampened the usage of the branch in the area of 20 percent of what would have been expected had this event not occurred, as the total NEC ridership increase of more than 10 percent would have also applied to the Princeton Branch’s patronage. Thus the relocation of the Princeton Station has resulted in 1 out of 5 potential riders going elsewhere.”

This result was predicted by the New Jersey Association of Railroad Passengers (**NJ-ARP**) and Save The Dinky, Incorporated (STDKY), a Princeton-based citizens group with over 400 supporters that formed to fight for retention of their community’s railroad passenger service to Princeton Junction. The abandonment, first announced in 2010, was strongly opposed by officials of the former Princeton Borough who asked that NJ Transit hold a public hearing on the transportation impacts. NJ Transit declined, taking the position that it had contractual obligations to Princeton University to agree to the move and that it had no legal obligations to hold a public hearing. The move has provoked four legal actions involving NJT, three in the New Jersey Courts and one before the federal Surface Transportation Board.

One suit, filed by STDKY and individual Princeton Branch riders, challenged the legality of the move under NJ Transit’s contract with Princeton University. Last December, a Chancery Judge rejected NJ Transit’s position that it was contractually obligated to make the move but found that the contract permitted the move if the University requested it. The Judge cited a letter by former Executive Director James Weinstein as evidence that NJ Transit had given its approval. STDKY has appealed that ruling.

STDKY also challenged a decision by the New Jersey Dept. of Environmental Protection authorizing NJT to relinquish its rights in the station which was listed on the New Jersey Register of Historic Places in 1984 as an “operating passenger railroad station.” An appellate panel recently upheld the NJDEP’s decision, and STDKY has filed a notice of intent to seek review in the New Jersey Supreme Court.

NJ-ARP, joined by STDKY, has also challenged NJ Transit’s claim that it has no legal obligations to hold a public hearing when it abandons a railroad station and right of way and causes a de facto curtailment of service to railroad passengers. That suit was filed as an appeal from a special telephonic NJ Transit Board meeting held last summer authorizing staff to transfer Princeton Branch railroad property to Princeton University. In addition to the hearing issue, this suit claims that Governor Christie, who has the final say over NJ Transit Board decisions, should have recused himself because of his role as a Trustee of Princeton University. The appellate panel hearing the case included Judge Michael Guadagno; recently the panel rejected a recusal request made on the ground that the Lieutenant Governor, his wife, would be the official to decide if the conflict issue prevails.

The National Association of Railroad Passengers (NARP) and **NJ-ARP** also have a petition before the Surface Transportation Board of the U.S. Department of Transportation seeking it to assert federal jurisdiction over this matter on the ground that NJ Transit has agreed to abandonment of a line of track in interstate commerce without obtaining proper federal approvals. According to **NJ-ARP** Vice President Philip Craig, “There is no question that the Princeton Branch is part of the interstate system because passengers can buy through tickets to New York, Philadelphia and points beyond Princeton Junction.” Craig said “The adverse impact of the station move on passengers is now written down in black and white in NJ Transit’s ridership reports.” Craig noted that up until 2013, about 45% of Princeton Branch riders were pedestrians who could easily reach the historic station on foot. He went on to say that it is “almost a story for The Onion or The Harvard Lampoon that a transit agency in the most congested state in the nation would agree to abandon an historic station that could be reached by foot from the center of town in order to build an access road to a parking garage.”

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