



New Jersey Association of Railroad Passengers

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 11, 2014

Off-Peak Fares: Restore them now!

Four years ago New Jersey Transit eliminated its discount Off-Peak fares in an effort to enhance revenues to the cash-starved agency. **NJ-ARP** said it was a bad idea then, and we maintain that position today. After continually urging the restoration of lower fares during non-peak travel periods before the New Jersey Transit Board of Directors, there appears to be some movement within that organization to study their revival.

Discounted fares for off-peak travel accomplishes two goals. First, it reduces overcrowding of rush-hour trains where there are standees by incentivizing those who have flexible work schedules, or can otherwise arrange to travel at other times, to avoid the peak. Second, it attracts discretionary riders during periods when many seats are empty. These are riders who otherwise would drive or find other means to reach their desired destinations, or even forgo such trips.

For these reasons off-peak discounts were offered by most railroads in the New York Metropolitan area, on both sides of the Hudson River. Given names like Manhattan Trip Ticket, Ladies Day Fare, Shoppers Special and One-Day Excursion, they were a part of the fare structure of these enterprises from almost the inception of their operations. The businessmen running these organizations saw these incentives as a way of filling otherwise empty seats and thereby gaining additional revenue. The Lackawanna Railroad had the most liberal approach, selling discounted tickets between intermediate way stations even in rush hours, realizing that the heaviest usage of the ultimately crowded trains were between the last stations closest to New York City. They saw their revenues would be increased if a seat could be used by a multiple number of passengers between different stations on the outer portions of their network.

In the past, these Off-Peak fare tickets were sold as round trips, as the railways felt that their objective of reducing peak crowding would be served better by demanding that passengers taking advantage of the lower fares make both their going and returning journeys outside of the rush hours. But those rules were established in the days when the cost of labor, specifically ticket collectors, was lower, and there was sufficient time and personnel to remind passengers presenting reduced fare tickets on peak hour trains that such tickets were not valid and to collect additional funds to negate the entire fare savings, even though the first part of the journey was taken during off-peak hours. In fact sometimes these discussions became quite vocal and time-consuming. But, they worked then, and will work now.

Thus **NJ-ARP** proposes that future reduced fares be one way point-to-point tickets, for use only outside peak travel periods, to be defined in timetables. In fact that policy was adopted by New York's MTA many decades ago, to avoid customer confusion and streamline their on-board personnel's job of checking fares, thereby virtually eliminating the need to stop and collect controversial step-up fares on already congested peak hour trains.

The day and time period of validity for such off-peak discounts to fill empty seats must be crafted carefully. Consideration and analysis must be given separately and jointly to Saturdays, Sundays, evenings, early mornings and the periods between rush hours, as the application of these fare incentives must be tailored to maximize additional ridership without increasing overcrowding. If an overly high volume of demand cannot be totally eliminated, NJ Transit should minimize the length of time the problem persists and also look at train lengths and increased frequency to alleviate it.

The traditional 5 day work week is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. Travel patterns have changed over the last few decades and the periods of overcrowding aboard New Jersey Transit trains now also vary from line to line as well as by day and time. Certain lines have seen great increases in ridership while others remain relatively stagnant. For example, because there may be standees on weekend inbound mid-morning trains on the Northeast Corridor, there is no good reason to reject discounts during that period on say, the Pascack Valley line, where there are seats galore. In other words, while consistency is usually desirable it is not necessarily the overriding factor and should not result in the denial of a reduced fare program to riders on some lines because they cannot be implemented on others. Thus It may be time for NJT to "think outside the box," away from a "one-size-fits-all" program.

Previously well thought out fare programs fell victim to the fare hike axe in 2010 and the result was predictable: more crowded peak-period trains and non-peak trains crying out for ridership. **NJ-ARP** stands ready to assist and support NJT in any effort to restore Off-Peak fares and any other creative fare initiatives that will fill seats and cater to the transportation needs of our citizens.

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