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N.J. Transit Links Midtown And Montclair

By RONALD SMOTHERS

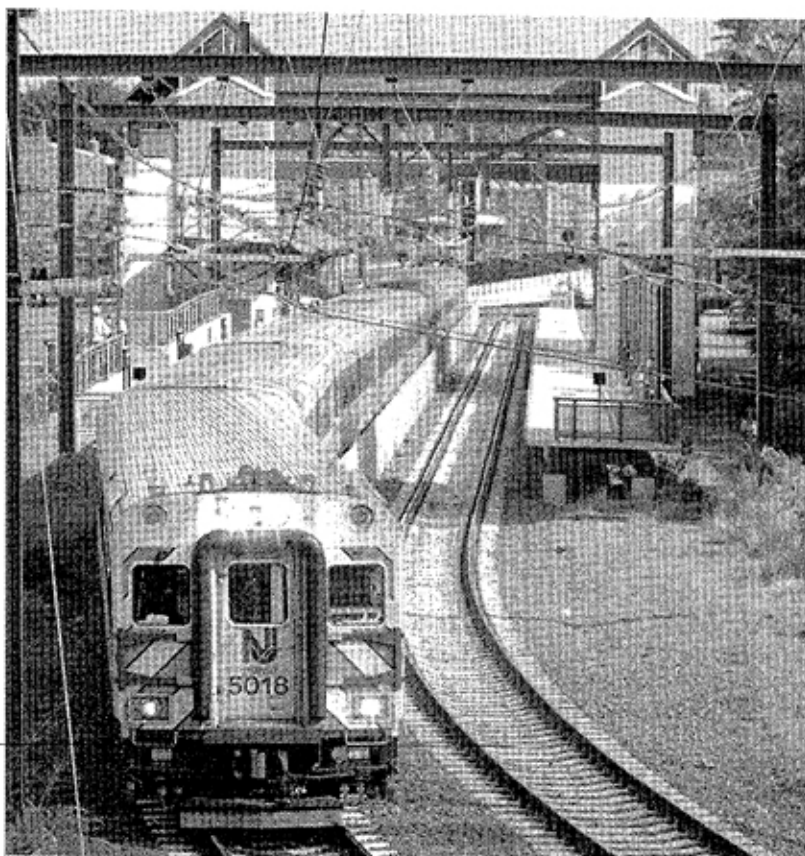
MONTCLAIR, N.J., Sept. 30 — New Jersey Transit inaugurated its Montclair Connection service today, opening a \$63 million station and a stretch of track that transit officials said would add more than 4,000 new riders and cut travel times to New York City by linking two existing lines.

The Montclair Connection unites the Boonton line of the old Lackawanna Rail Road and Midtown Direct line of the old Erie Rail Road just a few miles northwest of Montclair's new Bay Street Station.

Gov. James E. McGreevey opened the station in a ceremony today, noting that it would allow riders from Morris and Passaic Counties — as well as other Essex County commuters on the Boonton line who can now travel only to Hoboken — to connect with trains going directly to Midtown.

Work on the connection began years ago, but the idea of bridging a 1,500-foot separation between the two lines is more than 70 years old, according to transit officials and advocates. For years it was blocked by both the privately run railroads and the bus companies that would have lost riders.

When New Jersey Transit was created in 1979 and took over the two



Keith Myers/The New York Times

A train leaving the new Bay Street Station yesterday in Montclair, N.J.

lines, the connection faced local opposition and a lawsuit by Montclair residents who feared a safety hazard and opposed the demolition of housing for the project.

Mayor Robert Russo of Montclair said he and others dropped their opposition some years ago when they

were able to negotiate changes in the state's transportation plan to ease safety and traffic fears.

They also successfully pressed for the construction of housing to replace what was lost, as well as a new fire station near the new train station.

Montclair's first Midtown Direct trains roll out

New service shaves time off commutes

BY JERRY BARCA
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Commuters had mixed reviews yesterday for NJ Transit's new rail service from Montclair to Midtown.

Converted bus riders and passengers living near the Essex County stations enjoyed the new convenience. But commuters further west on the Boonton line had to deal with major scheduling changes that disrupted their morning trip.

The \$63 million electric train service takes passengers from all six Montclair stations to New York Penn Station in about 40 minutes. The new service drops Boonton line passengers off at the Montclair Heights or Newark Broad Street stations.

The Boonton line, which travels from Hackettstown to Hoboken, cannot run direct because New York Penn Station does not allow diesel trains. The switches in Montclair and Newark are necessary because tracks on the Boonton line are not electrified and can only handle diesel trains.

Before, Manhattan-bound Boonton passengers would have to travel to Hoboken and take a PATH train. Montclair line riders heading to the city used to change trains in Newark or Hoboken. Between 6:30 and 8:30 a.m. yesterday, 1,432 riders boarded the Midtown Direct for New York, NJ Transit officials said.

"Yeah, this works," said Robert Mike of Upper Montclair.

Mike left his house around 8:10 a.m., walked three blocks and caught the 8:22 train. Before the service, Mike said he would "roll the dice" and ride a bus into the city. Last Friday his bus gamble took two hours. Yesterday he made it to work in about an hour, he said.

Jodi Zielinski will turn her bus pass in for a train ticket. The Montclair resident said she will take the train for its consistent schedule.

"Everybody I knew that would take the bus will be taking the train," Zielinski said.



Morning commuter Jamie Horowitz, left, complains about the train schedule on the first day of Montclair's new Midtown Direct service, noting the train either gets her to work 30 minutes early or 15 minutes late.

But not everyone in Montclair is welcoming the new locomotive line. Resident Shannon Siwinski laments the frequency and timing of train whistles she said sound off at 5:40 a.m., about an hour and a half earlier than they used to.

"If you live within two blocks, it's certainly a much greater infringement on quality of life," she said.

At a news conference yesterday hosted by the town at the new Bay Street Station, Gov. James E. McGreevey spoke about the train's impact on increasing property value and the shortened commute for the 3,700 riders NJ Transit estimates will make daily use of the new Midtown line.

The train line was created by electrifying five miles of track in Montclair and laying down 1,500 feet of new track to link the Boon-

ton and Midtown Direct lines. The service only runs on weekdays and officials expect about 500 new riders to join the train in the next few weeks.

Joseph Gulotta of Boonton was one of those new passengers. Even though he only expects to shave 15 minutes off his commute, Gulotta prefers the train because it is "more civilized than a bus."

Nicole Lotito of Wayne is riding the new line and saying goodbye to morning drives to Hoboken. Whether she picks up the Boonton line in Little Falls or drives to Montclair, Lotito won't pay \$20 a day to park and then have to hop on the PATH to get into the city.

"It was a lot less stressful. I think I'm going to do it every day," Lotito said after her morning trip.

Other riders were less than satisfied with their new commute.



Commuters at the Montclair Heights train station prepare to board the 8:22 a.m. train direct to New York Penn Station.

Jaime Horowitz of Montville said she doesn't understand why NJ Transit scheduled trains to arrive in New York Penn Station at 7:48, 8:32 and 9:11 a.m. meaning [See TRAIN, Page 25]

TRAIN

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Montclair service gets mixed reviews

Commuters are either very early for work or late for work.

"People have to get to work by 8:30 and 9 a.m. Who has to be at work at 9:11 a.m.?" she said.

A 20-minute wait to board a train in Montclair led 36-year commuter Robert Burn to maintain his normal itinerary to reach Midtown.

Burn took the Boonton line from Mountain Lakes to Hoboken. Then he took a PATH train and arrived at 33rd Street at 8:31 a.m., one minute before the Midtown Direct he would've ridden arrived in New York.

"There's no gain from Mountain Lakes. But for Montclair and those farther down the line, this will be great," he said.

Doug Bowen, vice president of the New Jersey Association of Railroad Passengers, said he is waiting to see how the first week goes. First-day complaints are not a true barometer of the service, he said.

"We remain optimistic that more people will benefit than will be inconvenienced," he said.

Bowen has said he will speak with NJ Transit about adjusting the schedule based on passenger needs resulting from the new line, he said.

"We constantly look at scheduling to see where we can make adjustments, if we can. This is a brand new service and we're monitoring it closely," said Penny Bassett Hackett, NJ Transit spokeswoman.

Staff writer Philip Read contributed to this report.