

2. Purpose and Need for Action

This chapter discusses the purpose of the proposed new passenger rail service in the Northern Branch Corridor and the need for transportation improvements in northeastern Hudson County and southeastern Bergen County, New Jersey. Support for the assumptions made in this section is included in Chapter 1: Background and Setting, which describes the historic development patterns and quantifies the socioeconomic conditions that have led to the need for the Northern Branch project.

2.1. Purpose and Need

The Northern Branch Corridor is characterized as a mature densely-settled suburban environment. The study area has a growing population and a high proportion of residents that work in business districts outside of the area. Between 2000 and 2030 the Bergen County communities within the Northern Branch Corridor service market area are anticipated to experience population increases of 13 percent overall. A large commuter population resides within the service market area communities, with approximately 20 percent commuting to Manhattan and the Hudson County Waterfront. According to Census 2000 data, approximately 25,500 Bergen County Northern Branch Corridor residents travel to these two destinations.

The current transportation system within the densely-settled Northern Branch Corridor is characterized as a substantial roadway-based transportation system. This system includes limited-access highways as well as a variety of local and commuter bus routes, all of which contribute to the recurring traffic congestion prevalent within the corridor and on the region's roadways and crossings.

In general, the frequency of peak-hour public transit services is dictated by system constraints and not by need. Heavy peak-hour roadway congestion limits the throughput of local and commuter buses, notably at the Lincoln Tunnel and Manhattan's Port Authority Bus Terminal (PABT). The PABT was constructed in the 1950s and has reached the limits of its design. Service during the morning and evening peak hours is often delayed by the volume of riders or number of vehicles in the queue. In addition, current bus service to Manhattan is at capacity and putting more vehicles into service is not an option, as the Express Bus Lane at the Lincoln Tunnel is at capacity.

If not significantly hampered by capacity limitations, the corridor's roadway-based transportation system would provide an acceptable level of mobility for area residents and workers. The population and economic shifts discussed in Chapter 1: Background and Setting, have led to increased mobility needs, placing strains on the existing transportation system. An increasing population and an improvement in employment opportunities deliver increasingly more work and non-work trips to county roads and transit lines, during both peak and non-peak hours. Travel times to work continue to increase, as does the length of the peak period, as travelers seek to avoid mounting congestion. These conditions are further exacerbated by the continued dominant use of the single occupant vehicle in the study area. Without other choices, these conditions are expected to continue without improvement into the future.

Growing congestion would make the transportation system increasingly unable to meet existing and future mobility demands. Further, growing congestion would likely impact Bergen County's ability to attract and retain commercial development. In recognition of the latter possibility, the Bergen County Economic Development Corporation and the master plans of all municipalities in the study area (refer to Chapter 6: Local Plans) identify transportation infrastructure improvements as key to the economic health of the study area.

Growing congestion would also be expected to negatively impact the roadway-based transit system. Likely congestion impacts to transit include reduced reliability and a limited ability to serve potential new markets, close existing gaps in service areas, and improve regional links. Without the ability to provide

reliable and comprehensive service, or to serve new markets, the transit system will remain at a competitive disadvantage with automobile commuting in the study area and will be ineffectual in efforts to reduce congestion.

The purpose and need of the proposed project is to improve mobility within Hudson and Bergen Counties, alleviate some traffic congestion, and support continued economic growth.

2.2. Goals and Objectives

Provisions of new transportation service in the Northern Branch Corridor would address the following goals and objectives:

Goal 1: Meet the needs of travelers in the project area.

Objectives:

- **Attract riders to transit.** A central goal of the project is to attract more riders to rail transit in the Northern Branch Corridor. In spite of its proximity to New York, eastern Bergen County continues to have high single occupancy vehicle commutation. The goal of re-introducing rail transit is to encourage a greater transit ridership both on opening day and into the future.
- **Improve travel time.** Travelers in the project area put a high value on their time, and are looking for travel options that will improve their travel time and reliability.
- **Improve convenience.** Travelers are looking for new travel options that will make traveling in the region more convenient. They are looking for frequent service, adequate parking at stations, competitive travel times, and convenient connections to other transit services, such as ferries, PATH, and feeder services.
- **Provide more options for travelers.** Today, travelers are severely limited in their travel options. Transit can be used for only a very small portion of the area's travel needs. Travelers want more travel options to meet their diverse travel needs. Options could include service to many destinations, including Midtown Manhattan, Lower Manhattan, the Hudson River Waterfront, Newark, and recreational areas, such as the Sports Complex and the Jersey Shore, especially on weekends and at night.
- **Improve services for low-income/minority/transit-dependent travelers.** Transit-dependent residents in the project area need good transit options to more of the region's jobs, not only the jobs in Manhattan, but growing employment centers in New Jersey, like the Hudson River Waterfront area, Newark, the Meadowlands, and Bergen and Rockland employment centers.

Goal 2: Advance Cost-Effective Transit Solutions

Objectives:

- **Support favorable farebox recovery.** For the vast majority of transit systems, fare revenue does not cover the cost of providing service. However, higher farebox recovery ratios allow transit agencies to maximize the amount of service that can be provided for the same dollar of public operating subsidy. One of the goals of the Northern Branch project is to introduce rail transit to the corridor in a manner that is sensitive to the need to minimize the operating subsidy required to run the service. This will help ensure that the provision of transit service in the corridor is financially sustainable.

- **Advance cost-effective transit solutions.** The objective is to advance a project that, from a cost-benefit perspective, provides the greatest overall benefit at the lowest capital cost.
- **Support future expansion, scalability and affordability.** The Northern Branch project should allow for future transit expansion while at the same time provide a solution that is affordable to construct. With limited capital funds, the ability to advance projects in phases helps to keep the projects affordable. Project scalability allows projects to be constructed without precluding future expansion projects. One of the criteria on which the Northern Branch project will be evaluated is the degree to which one phase of a project integrates into a more global planning effort for transportation improvement in the region.

Goal 3: Attract growth and support development in Bergen and Hudson Counties, including the Hudson River Waterfront.

Objectives:

- **Provide transportation capacity to support growth.** Population and employment growth in and around Bergen County and Hudson County is expected to continue in the future. Additional transportation capacity and new travel options will be needed to support this growth, providing access between the jobs in the counties and surrounding residential communities. Growing congestion will continue to have negative impacts on the area's economy in the future.
- **Help attract new businesses.** Companies looking to locate new facilities or expand existing facilities in Bergen County and Hudson County will be looking for assurances that steps are being taken to provide the area with new travel alternatives. One of the major assets of this area is its proximity to New York City and its role in sustaining the strength of the State Plan's Metropolitan Planning Area. New transportation choices that improve access to New York and the rest of the region will help Bergen County and Hudson County to maintain their competitive advantage in the region.

Goal 4: Improve regional mobility and access.

Objectives:

- **Provide connections to a variety of locations within the region.** With the one exception of Manhattan, Bergen County's access to the rest of the region is almost entirely by auto, on highways that are becoming increasingly congested. With the completion of the Secaucus Transfer, the areas served by the Main, Bergen, and Pascack Valley lines now benefit from rail access to the growing Hudson River Waterfront area, to Newark, to Trenton, and to the major recreational attractions, like the Meadowlands and the New Jersey Shore.

Goal 5: Reduce roadway congestion.

Objectives:

- **Provide more travel options for travelers trying to avoid highway congestion.** Major regional highways in the project area are heavily congested. There are a limited number of major highways, each serving intra-county and regional travel needs. Congestion in Bergen County is a growing problem, which is likely to become more serious in the future. Transit strategies are unlikely to substantially reduce congestion, but can provide useful new travel alternatives for travelers trying to avoid congestion.

Goal 6: Enhance the transit network.

Objectives:

- **Eliminate gaps in the rail network.** Bergen County's transit share for trips to Manhattan is lower than any other part of northern New Jersey. This is due to several gaps in the transit network serving the area. For example, there is no rail service in eastern Bergen County. The closest rail line is the Pascack Valley Line, which is west of the Hackensack River. This inconvenient and capacity-constrained line is not an option for most residents of eastern Bergen County. Also, rail service is infrequent during off-peak periods. Rail service is best to Lower Manhattan, via PATH and ferry, less effective to the Valley, between Canal Street and 34th Street, via PATH, and most difficult to Midtown.
- **Eliminate gaps in the bus network.** The bus network in eastern Bergen County also has some gaps. First, the network only serves Midtown Manhattan. Also, in the easternmost parts of the County, there is little or no bus service. In the more central parts of the study area there are many bus routes. However, these routes are generally slow because they travel on local roads and make many stops along the route to pick up passengers.