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AB 167 (Sub-no. 1189X): Comments on the Harsimus Branch Section 106 Process and MOA

The Friends of LSP is a 35-year-old urban open space and park advocacy organization centered on the second most visited state park in the United States, Liberty State Park, with 5 million visitors a year and is next to shrines of our democracy, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island.

We have a deep interest in the Harsimus Branch and Embankment because the habitat that has naturally seeded there enhances the value of the habitat that Liberty State Park provides – very rare and significant in this urban area. LSP's interior's former freight yard site's historic fill will be remediated and 165 acres of natural habitats & trails will be created for Public Use!

The Embankment project and Liberty Park also share strong connections of waterfront train history. The state park's historic Central Railroad of NJ complex, together with the Pennsylvania Railroad Harsimus Branch & Embankment, tell the American story of the railroads here in Jersey City better than any documentation and signage could ever do. Two-thirds of the immigrants who were processed at Ellis Island then went to the train terminal to start out on their American lives. Many of them settled in downtown Jersey City around the Harsimus Branch. The Section 106 review currently going on has identified the Immigrant Roman Catholic Historic District of Holy Rosary and St. Anthony's, across from the Embankment, as eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Although not recognized in the formal Section 106 process underway, you can see that, because of the powerful immigrant history interconnections, the adverse effects of abandonment will reach far beyond the Harsimus Branch itself, and diminish the historic significance of Liberty State Park's own history.

For more than a century, railroads dominated Jersey City's waterfront and walled off the public's access to, use and enjoyment of the Hudson River waterfront, making huge profits and then leaving their structures derelict and their land for government and nearby residents to clean up. Conrail added to the insult for decades by leaving it to residents to remove the snow and trash left around its property, then sold part of the corridor unlawfully when the City was trying to purchase it for public use.

Two items on the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection web site give a flavor of the rail history here:

CRRNJ Central Railroad of NJ Terminal at LSP (1860 - 1967)

The Historic CRRNJ Train Terminal

Originally chartered in 1838, “The Elizabeth and Somerville Railroad Company” operated a fledgling line in Elizabeth. Christened the Central Railroad of New Jersey (CRRNJ) in 1849, the line reached Phillipsburg, New Jersey by 1852. In 1860, the CRRNJ chartered a waterfront location in Jersey City. Completed four years later, the terminal was constructed primarily on landfill from New York City and ballast from ocean going vessels. The new CRRNJ Terminal provided both an easy route across the Hudson and a gateway to the ocean.



Heavier transportation demands soon rendered the original terminal inadequate. By 1889, a new terminal had been designed and constructed by the Boston architectural firm of Peabody and Stearns. The three-story head house joined twelve tracks with six platforms to the ferry slips at the water's edge. Service and repair facilities float bridges, barges and thawing sheds combined to make this complex the largest in the New York Harbor at the turn of the century.

With the opening of the Immigration Station on Ellis Island in 1892, traffic increased dramatically. Two-thirds of these courageous newcomers, welcomed by the Statue of Liberty and processed on Ellis Island, started their new lives via the CRRNJ Terminal, settling in New Jersey or traveling on to other states.

By the turn of the century, the CRRNJ Terminal accommodated between 30,000-50,000 people per day on 128 ferry runs and 300 trains. By 1914, the train and ferry sheds were enlarged to accommodate the growing numbers of commuters. The Bush train shed, still standing today, housing 20 tracks, was the largest one ever built.

The end of “The Age of the Railroad” was in sight and the industry, which had peaked by 1929, rapidly declined. Better highways, competition from the trucking industry, and the shift from coal to oil and gas led to the demise of the railroads. Finally in 1967, the Aldene Plan called for the rerouting of all train traffic to the Pennsylvania Station in Newark. The CRRNJ declared bankruptcy and Terminal ceased passenger operations in April 1967.

Deserted and falling into ruin, the CRRNJ Terminal and the adjacent acreage was bought through local, state and federal funds. A massive clean-up campaign was begun and by 1975 the building was added to both the State and National Register of Historic Places. Today the

Terminal is the focus of community and statewide special events. Interpretive exhibits are on display, offering present day visitors the opportunity to experience both the history and the renaissance of this great landmark.

Lehigh Valley Railroad

The CRRNJ was not the only railroad to operate out of the area now comprising Liberty State Park. The Lehigh Valley Railroad (LVRR) began running in 1855, and by 1880 it was one of the four great railroad lines in New Jersey.

The railroad took its name from the beds of anthracite coal on Pennsylvania's Lehigh River. LVRR trains transported most of this cleaner, "smoke-free" hard coal to the New York harbor markets. This coal became the new railroad fuel as well as the fuel for New Jersey's growing industries in Paterson and Newark.



Originally the railroad terminated in Phillipsburg, New Jersey, where the trains would connect to Central Railroad of New Jersey tracks to get to Jersey City. Starting in the 1871, the LVRR leased property along the Morris Canal's border and built its own terminal and freight yard on the Jersey City waterfront. They later purchased the land, thereby increasing its profits because it no longer had to pay the CRRNJ for the use of its lines.

With the eventual decline in the New York coal traffic in the early 1900's, the LVRR began to convert to more passenger service. When the CRRNJ terminal and ferry closed in 1967, LVRR tracks remained essential to commuters, bringing them from Cranford's Aldene Junction to Newark's Penn Station for the Manhattan ferry. However, by 1968, the LVRR was forced into bankruptcy. The Rail Reorganization Act allocated the LVRR tracks to the Consolidated Rail Corporation (Conrail) in 1973. -----

The photograph below of the railyards formerly in Liberty State Park gives a feeling for how the rail lines degraded the land, both in Liberty State Park and on and around the Harsimus Branch:



Now it finally appears there is a real opportunity for positive change, if only Conrail and the purchaser of the Embankment and STB cooperated with Jersey City, the Embankment Coalition and Rails to Trails and the other consulting parties who care about the community. We fully support the Embankment Preservation Coalition in calling for meaningful mitigation and for comprehensive public participation in this major public policy issue, and we call on Conrail and the purchaser to include their mitigation plan in the draft Memorandum of Agreement for our consideration. The current MOA does nothing to avoid, minimize, or mitigate adverse effects and no organization that cares about historic preservation, the environment, and fairness should sign it.

Urban re-uses of former industrial sites as public land to serve the Public Good is enlightened and necessary to benefit future generations' quality of life. This is being done in Liberty State Park on the former rail yards, and should be done with the Harsimus Branch. See the LSP plan below of 165 acres of woodlands, meadows, tidal saltwater wetlands, freshwater wetlands and six miles of trails

