



New Jersey Sierra Club
Hudson County Group
Email: HUDSONSIERRACLUB@gmail.com

March 21, 2017

Ms. Victoria Ruston, Director
Surface Transportation Board
Office of Environmental Analysis
395 E Street, SW
Washington, DC 20423

Re: *AB_167_1189_X and related cases: The Harsimus Branch, Jersey City, NJ*

Dear Ms. Ruston,

The Hudson County Sierra Club is writing to express its concern about the future of the historic Harsimus Branch in downtown Jersey City, New Jersey, and to urge the Surface Transportation Board ("STB") to follow its mandate to preserve and protect this historic resource.

Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club's mission is, in part, to "educate and enlist humanity to protect and preserve the quality of the natural and human environment." As protectors of the human environment, we are opposed to efforts to disassemble the branch and demolish the Embankment. Both the Branch and the Embankment are historical resources of national importance. Remnants of the historic Pennsylvania Railroad, the Branch and the Embankment served railroad trains carrying cargo from the heartland of America to the New York metropolitan region for over 100 years, contributing immensely to the growth and development of the area. They also were a powerful presence in the daily life of Jersey City residents, shaped the contours of downtown Jersey City, and served as the border between two national historic districts that abut the Embankment.

The destruction of the Branch and Embankment would adversely affect these historic resources, and undermine the entire historical fabric of downtown Jersey City. The Sierra Club strongly opposes any such action, and believes that the STB should ensure that the Branch and Embankment are protected.

Fortunately, there is no need to demolish these historic assets, and, in fact, their preservation would serve a tremendous benefit to the area, as the City of Jersey City has pledged to preserve the Branch and Embankment, and to reuse them for the historically compatible public purposes of rail, trail, and open space. The Sierra Club fully supports the City's intentions for the Branch, which is aligned with its mission to "practice and promote the responsible use of the earth's ecosystems and resources", and its goals to achieve ambitious and just climate solutions.

The City's vision for the Branch and Embankment represents a 21st century solution to the transportation and open space issues currently facing Jersey City and Hudson County, which will only multiply in the future, as the area continues to grow. With a population of over 675,000, Hudson County is the state's most densely populated county in the most densely populated state in the nation.



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The population of Jersey City, the largest city in Hudson County at over 265,000 people, grew by 6.7 percent from 2010 to 2015, and is expected to soon be the largest city in the State.

For the City to accommodate this population growth, additional transportation options are required, making the preservation of the Harsimus Branch transportation corridor critical. The corridor links Journal Square, a transportation hub that is undergoing heavy development, with Downtown Jersey City, which has seen massive new construction over the last few decades. The mass transit facilities that currently service the two locations – like the Port Authority Trans-Hudson line – are already under heavy strain, and are insufficient to accommodate the area's expected growth. Additional mass transit is needed, and the Harsimus Branch is the optimal solution to this issue.

In addition to serving inner-city Jersey City, the Harsimus Branch, which is near the old Erie Railroad line through the Bergen Arches, can serve the greater Hudson County area and beyond. The combination of the Harsimus Branch and the Erie has long been seen as a transportation route through Hudson County for mass transit. Hudson County is the only county in New Jersey where more residents use public transportation than drive, and, with the growth the county is experiencing, additional mass transit options are required.

In addition to serving as a rail corridor, the City's vision for the Branch and Embankment includes much needed trails and open space. Alternative transportation, including bicycling and walking, is very popular in Hudson County; however, it is made difficult by the area's dense buildout and heavy automotive traffic. Like mass transit, alternative transportation should be encouraged as an effective and responsible solution to conserving energy and minimizing pollution. The City's vision for the Harsimus Branch would provide safe trails and open space that would allow area residents to easily access mass transit and use alternative methods of transportation.

Beyond Jersey City, the Harsimus Branch could also serve as the centerpiece for a once-in-a-century opportunity to create an extensive regional transportation network. The Harsimus Branch and other out-of-use railroads, the Morris Canal, the Hudson River Waterfront Walkway, the Hackensack Riverwalk, and NJ Transit property can be pieced together to create a regional network of trails that would provide residents with a safe, off-street alternative for accessing the area's transportation links and open space, and for traveling throughout the region. These county trails would link to a regional and national trail system via the 9-11 Memorial Trail, the East Coast Greenway and the Long Path, among others. These trails link historic resources and/or are themselves nationally significant historic resources.

The Sierra Club believes in the importance of creating transportation systems that minimize the impact on our ecosystem, and that provide everyone, including pedestrians, bicyclists and transit users, with adequate access to jobs, shopping, services, and recreation. The City's vision for the Harsimus Branch provides all of these, and does so while remaining compatible with the historic preservation of the Branch and Embankment. It is an ideal solution to some of the transportation and urban woes



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facing the entire Hudson County region, and our members look forward to the reuse of the Harsimus Branch and other out-of-use corridors for the needs of the public in the 21st century and beyond.

The STB has a mandate to protect historic resources when it is feasible to do so. It is feasible to preserve the Harsimus Branch, and the Hudson County Sierra Club urges the STB to do so. Without it, historical resources will be destroyed, and a unique opportunity to add much-needed mass transit and open space in Hudson County will be lost.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "JP", followed by a horizontal line.

Jonathan Perrelle
Conservation Chair
Hudson County Sierra Club