

# Opponents: NJT avoided public input

By **RICHARD PEARSALL**  
Courier-Post Staff

NJ Transit waited until after its board endorsed the riverfront rail line before scheduling public meetings on the proposal.

And the purpose of those meetings was to disseminate information, not gather it.

NJ Transit would later claim it did not need to gather input because that had already been accomplished as part of a study of South Jersey rail alternatives in 1994 and 1995.

But that study, called a Major Investment Study, or MIS, examined two other routes, never looked at the riverfront corridor and therefore did not include the riverfront communities in its schedule of public hearings.

Though the 1995 study didn't look at the riverfront, NJ Transit's board of directors cited the study in its November 1996 resolution endorsing the corridor for a light rail line.

A 1998 report done by an NJ Transit consultant went so far as to describe the 1995 study as an examination of the "Camden-Trenton-Gloucester Corridor" even though in 1995 Trenton was not on anyone's radar screen as a light rail destination.

The earlier study was part of an application for federal funds and its hearings, in places like Mount Laurel and Woodbury, adhered to federal guidelines for involving the public in the early stages of the planning.

When it veered off to the riverfront route, NJ Transit abandoned its application for federal funds and with it the guidelines for public hearings. In their place, NJ Transit installed a program described in a prospectus prepared for bidders in 1998.

"A Community Outreach Program was initiated in December 1996 in accordance with direction from the NJ Transit Board of Directors," wrote Daniel, Mann, Johnson & Mendenhall, a consultant to NJ Transit.

"The purpose of the program has been the dissemination of information concerning the conceptual engineering and planning of the ... (South

Jersey) project, as well as helping communities to understand the subsequent final design and construction phases."

DMJM further detailed the objectives of the community outreach:

- Provide information to citizens.

- Strengthen communication with elected officials and with business leaders.

- Support the needs of advocacy groups.

- Establish relationships and "pathways of communication" with project area media representatives.

There was no mention of public input.

And even the public hearings that NJ Transit hosted were short-lived, replaced by what NJ Transit dubbed "open houses."

In this new format, NJ Transit experts stationed themselves in various corners of a room, backed by charts and maps, and answered questions from anyone who happened to wander in over a period of three or four hours.

NJ Transit said it switched formats to facilitate the flow of information.

Critics said the change was meant to mute opposition.

"The idea was to prevent follow-ups and dissents," said Assemblyman Jack Connors, a Democrat from Pennsauken who opposed the line. "They didn't want a theater-style hearing where people really get into it."

At one of the first hearings, Palmyra resident Fred Dare listened as his fellow residents peppered NJ Transit officials with questions about the line and were told everything would work out.

"Are you here to hear our voices saying 'no' to this," Dare finally asked, "or to sell us on this system?"

Jim Gross, a Riverton resident who has been an outspoken opponent of the light rail, recalled his reaction to the first hearing he attended: "Rubbish."

Nothing has changed his view.

"We were agin' it then, we're agin' it now, and we've ingested huge doses of cynicism in between," he said. "Public input didn't amount to a hill of beans."



PARIS L. GRAY/Courier-Post  
**Matt Longood (above) works on the construction of the light rail track in Camden. Each car shell (below) is assembled by Adtranz workers in Europe and shipped to New Jersey.**

## About the series

■ Richard Pearsall, a veteran newsman at the Courier-Post, has been covering Burlington County for five years. He can be reached at (856) 486-2465.

To tell us what you think about the South Jersey light rail line, please e-mail us at:

[cpedit@courierpostonline.com](mailto:cpedit@courierpostonline.com)

## Light rail series

**TODAY:** Was this any way to plan a railroad?

**MONDAY:** Who's going to ride it? And a look at the line's unusual financing.

**TUESDAY:** Population growth is only route to line's success.

## Few take mass transit, leading to congestion

By **RICHARD PEARSALL**  
Courier-Post Staff

Despite the presence of the PATCO Hi-Speedline, regarded in the industry as one of the country's best commuter rail lines, only 5 percent of South Jersey residents use mass transit to get to work.

And even fewer use it to play, shop or otherwise move from spot to spot.

There is no debate on where the chief trouble spot in the region lies: the spaghetti-like intersection of Route 42 and I-295.

"It brings together conflicting movements," said William Beetle, director of transportation systems planning for the state Department of Transportation. "You've got people coming up from Washington Township headed for Cherry Hill or Mount Laurel via 295. You've got Glassboro, Pitman and Winslow coming up 42 and 55 to get to 76 and Philadelphia. Put these together and you've got a real crunch."

"It's the single biggest challenge in terms of traffic."

No one knows that better than Bob Murphy, except, of course, the people who drive through during rush hour. Murphy, general manager of Smartraveler, has been looking at traffic in the region for 20 years, with Philadelphia TV station WPVI, the ARCO Go Patrol and now Smartraveler, a free information service funded by the transportation departments in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

"Route 42 is the biggest headache," he said without hesitation. "It backs up as far as the Atlantic City Expressway in the morning."

Other trouble spots, he said, include:

- Route 73, particularly from Maple Shade to Mount Laurel.

- Route 38 from Pennsauken to Moorestown.

Beetle agreed, but said the problem areas of Route 73 extend farther south to Marlton and beyond.

As for Route 130, which runs parallel to the light rail route, "it's not experiencing the same problems," Beetle said, although it could "if Burlington County's ambitious development plan succeeds."

"Route 295 is really a Route 130 bypass," Murphy said. "Route 130 takes more local traffic, I-295 the long-distance traffic."

## Southern N.J. Light Rail

**Length:** 34 miles

**Stations:** 20

**Start-to-finish time:** 65 min.

**Maximum speed:** 55 mph

**Passengers per car:** 202

**How they run:** diesel-powered

**Hours:** 6 a.m.-10 p.m. daily

**Schedule:** every 15 minutes during rush hours; on half-hour other times

**Fares:** not set yet, comparable to bus

**Permanent jobs:** 200

**Operators:** Bechtel-led consortium

**Opening:** Dec. 31, 2002, or Jan. 1, 2003

## Q&A

### What work is being done?

- Relocation of utility lines.

- Reconstruction, expansion or replacement of 20 bridges (new bridge over Rancocas Creek between Riverside and Delanco).

- Improvements to 52 grade crossings, including installation of signaling devices, gates.

- Construction of equipment maintenance-storage facility for light rail in Camden, and one for Conrail freight operations in Burlington City.

- Construction of sidings where needed to allow trains traveling in opposite directions to pass.

- Replacement of track on existing freight rail bed with continuously welded rails. Installation of track in Camden.

- Construction of 20 station stops, platforms and shelters similar to those for bus riders.

- Construction of 20 diesel-powered cars capable of carrying 200 passengers, half of them seated.

### Who awarded the contract?

- NJ Transit

### Who got the main contract?

- A \$604.5 million "design, build, maintain and operate" contract was awarded to Southern New Jersey Rail Group, a consortium led by: Bechtel Infrastructure Corp., an international engineering and construction firm; and Adtranz, a joint venture of ABB and Daimler-Benz which provides transit vehicles and systems.

### What are the components of the main contract?

- \$453 million for design and construction.

- \$151.2 million operation, maintenance over 10 years.

### What are the other costs?

- \$341 million interest on construction bonds.

- \$67 million to purchase line from Conrail.

- \$72 million to DMJM, general design consultant.

- \$44 million for preliminary design work.

- \$20 million for property acquisition.

- \$15 million to relocate utility lines.

- \$9 million in insurance costs.

- \$9 million in fees to municipalities.

### What is the state's commitment, including financing costs over 20 years?

- \$1.2 billion.

- Possible additional cost: \$78 million to extend line to State House.

### What is a light rail vehicle?

- A light rail vehicle, or LRV, is a term used to describe trams, trolleys or streetcars constructed in the 1970s or later and usually powered by overhead electric wires. Light rail vehicles are heavier and have more horsepower, however, than traditional trolleys or streetcars.

### Why the name "light" rail?

- Light rail cars can be heavier than heavy rail cars; "light" refers to their intended capacity.

### How fast do they operate?

- The maximum speed of light rail vehicles is normally 60 mph. Heavy rail trains usually operate at higher speeds.

### How else do they differ from heavy rail systems?

- The distance between stations is typically shorter than within heavy rail systems. Light rail vehicles may operate in mixed street traffic, even in the middle of major thoroughfares.

### How many light rail systems are there in the U.S.?

- Light rail systems are now in use in more than 15 U.S. cities coast-to-coast, including Philadelphia (SEPTA trolleys); over 30 more have been proposed or approved elsewhere around the country.

(Sources: Light Rail Central, The North American Light Rail Information Site, at [www.lightrail.com](http://www.lightrail.com); DMJM)

# Transit officials move from government to industry

By **RICHARD PEARSALL**  
Courier-Post Staff

The revolving door between the transportation industry and New Jersey's Statehouse spun freely during the Whitman years, with former Transportation Commissioner Frank Wilson leading the way.

Wilson's job talks with prospective employers in the private sector while he was still transportation commissioner led to an investigation by the state's Executive Commission on Ethical Standards.

In a separate matter that was not investigated, Wilson almost single-handedly engineered approval of the South Jersey light rail line, then left to take a job with the firm that did the feasibility study and preliminary design of the line.

Others followed where Wilson led, moving in both directions through the revolving door. No questions, however, were raised about their ethics.

Frank Russo, the head of NJ Transit's Office of New Rail Construction under Wilson, resigned in 1998 to take a job with Raytheon, the Lexington, Mass.-based construction giant.

Russo's office was created by Wilson to oversee projects like the South Jersey line and the Hudson-Bergen, the state's other light rail project. The Hudson-Bergen is being designed, built, operated and maintained by Raytheon.

Jeffrey Warsh, the current executive director of NJ Transit, moved to that public post in 1999 from his job as public relations executive for The MWW Group, in East Rutherford, a PR firm working on the Hudson-Bergen line for Raytheon. Before going to MWW, Warsh was a state assemblyman and member of the Assembly Transportation Committee.

James Weinstein, the current state transportation commissioner, was president of Riverfront Associates, a Trenton-based public relations firm, when he was tapped by Gov. Christine Todd Whitman in 1999 to head the transportation department.

Representing casino mogul Steve Wynn, Riverfront successfully lobbied the state to build a \$330 million highway tunnel from downtown Atlantic City to the marina district, home of Wynn's Mirage casino.

New Jersey officials are not prohibited from discussing employment with



**FRANK WILSON**

companies they're doing business with, nor is there any requirement that a period of time elapse before they join such a company.

Only two restrictions apply to sitting state officials:

- They are not to initiate employment talks.

- If they are solicited, they must report the contact to their superiors and recuse themselves from any further state business with their prospective employer.

Frank Wilson recused himself from the Nov. 26, 1996, vote by the NJ Transit board of directors approving the South Jersey Line.

A week later he joined Daniel, Mann, Johnson & Mendenhall, a Los Angeles-based engineering and con-

struction services firm, as a corporate vice president.

Daniel, Mann, Johnson & Mendenhall, which goes by its initials, DMJM, performed the study that concluded the Camden-to-Trenton line was feasible. It has since gone on to secure contracts for a total of \$72 million worth of work on the South Jersey project.

Wilson went on to become president and chief executive officer of DMJM, a post he held until October, when he became president of AECOM Technology Corp., DMJM's parent company.

Both DMJM and Wilson deny there was any conflict, and no question about a conflict was ever raised before the state Executive Commission on Ethical Standards.

"Before I talked to anyone about employment, I sought the direction of the ethics commission. Basically, I notified the world what I was doing."

And when he did have a discussion with a prospective employer, Wilson said, "from that day forward, I had nothing to do with any project that firm might have with the state."

At the time Wilson was talking with DMJM about employment, the attention

of Democrats in the Legislature and the ethics commission was focused on his talks with other prospective employers. These firms were involved with a bigger and more visible project, the installation of E-ZPass on state toll roads.

In the E-ZPass case, a bidder on the state contract, Lockheed-Martin, charged that Wilson had been talking about employment with other firms in the running for the contract.

The ethics commission investigated the charges at the request of state Sen. Richard Codey, an Essex County Democrat.

In 1997, Wilson agreed to settle with the commission by paying \$1,200 — \$300 for each of four charges that the commission concluded had some merit. He denied any wrongdoing.

Codey said the settlement was a "slap on the wrist" and little more than a cost of doing business for an executive on the rise.

The maximum penalty Wilson faced was \$2,000, or \$500 a count. And that would have involved turning the case over to the attorney general's office for prosecution.

Rita Strmensky, executive director of the ethics commission, said she has

urged the Legislature to raise the fines to make them more of a deterrent, but has not had any success. She said penalties haven't changed in 30 years.

In a recent interview, Wilson said it was his recollection that DMJM was called in to design the line, not to decide if it were feasible. The record shows that DMJM was hired to do both.

Under New Jersey regulations, hiring an engineering firm to study the feasibility of a project it could profit from does not constitute a conflict of interest, state officials say.

The Federal Transit Administration said it discourages such connections on any project it funds. But the South Jersey line does not involve any federal funding.

New Jersey law does prohibit ex-employees, while in their new jobs, from working on projects they participated in as state employees. A violation is punishable by a fine of up to \$5,000 and six months in jail.

Strmensky said there is no evidence that provision was violated.