The Hudson Bergen Light Rail (HBLR) line saved New Jersey and New York commuters more than 3.4 million gallons of gasoline last year - the equivalent fuel consumed by 6,000 cars annually.¹

Transportation is responsible for more than two-thirds of our nation's oil consumption and nearly a third of our carbon dioxide emissions. To make us more energy independent and reduce pollution, we need to build a transportation system that uses less oil, takes advantage of alternative fuels, and shifts as much of our travel as possible from transportation modes that consume a lot of energy to those that consume less.

The HBLR is a great example of how we can reduce gasoline consumption and increase energy independence through public transportation, in addition to strengthening the economy and improving quality of life.

Last year, nearly 16 million riders used the system – a more than 13 percent increase over ridership in 2007.² By comparison, light rail use grew 8 percent nationally from 2007 to 2008.³

Growth on the system for the first half of 2009 has tapered somewhat, falling slightly over 1 percent during the first half of 2009 compared to the first half of 2008. Much of this drop can be attributed to the recent economic recession, as people generally travel less (via cars and transit) during times of reduced economic activity.⁴ However, now that the economy is beginning to rebound, strong system growth is expected to continue, as suggested by historic growth trends shown in table 1:
Public transportation such as light rail conserves fuel and reduces pollution by carrying many more passengers on a per mile basis than automobiles. While the system consumes energy to move passengers, high levels of ridership translate to less energy consumed than comparable car travel. Furthermore, combined with savings realized by reduced congestion, denser development and related travel distance reductions, the HBLR is estimated to reduce overall energy use by an amount equivalent to 3.4 million gallons of gasoline per year. This also translates to a reduction of carbon dioxide pollution by more than 37,000 metric tons annually, equating to the annual fuel and pollution impact of 6,000 cars.\textsuperscript{v}

The long-awaited Northern Branch to Bergen County is about to be underway, and this crucial expansion will significantly improve transit access in Bergen County. Currently, only 17 percent of Bergen commuters use transit rail service – half of the usage of Hudson County commuters.\textsuperscript{vi} Furthermore, expanding the system to potential areas such as the West Side, the Meadowlands and Route 440 will allow the system to capture greater ridership potential, increase accessibility, and create even more opportunities for energy savings, pollution reduction, and improving the quality of life for area residents and workers.

Expanding access to transit extends benefits beyond energy savings and reducing pollution. Light rail can be an integral part of comprehensive smart growth strategy to create compact land use patterns, which make destinations more accessible, and provide people with more mobility choices - transit, rail, better biking and walking. Examining travel patterns in other U.S. cities suggest light rail could contribute to reducing the number of Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) by an estimated 10 percent per capita annually,
reducing fuel costs, time spent in traffic, and air pollution. Already, New Jersey residents spend more than $1,300 on gasoline per capita. Based on current consumption trends and projected increases in the cost of oil, this is expected to nearly double by 2030, to more than $2,400 per person in New Jersey.

Transit as a primary mode of travel results in savings beyond just fuel costs. Living and working in an area with comprehensive transit access enables households to reduce their overall car dependency. Using public transportation and having one less car is estimated to save households more than $9,000 per year, based on current auto ownership, fuel and parking costs.

Since car travel comes with a premium in the metropolitan area, especially in terms of limited parking and increased congestion, the rapid development along the waterfront starting in the late 1980’s spurred the need for better transportation choices. Local, state and federal elected officials responded by helping envision the Hudson Bergen line to make the Gold Coast a thriving, dynamic urban district. Given its proximity to New York City and metropolitan access enabled by the Port Authority Trans-Hudson (PATH) connection across the river, the new transit service had to be executed well in order to fully realize the potential of the area.

New Jersey Transit, in partnership with 21st Century Rail Corporation, established the new light rail service in 2000. This investment, in turn, has spurred more development well-integrated with the light rail line as well as better walkability. Since the line opened, more than 10,000 residential units have been introduced to the area, and since the system was conceived in the late 1980s, the area has grown its inventory of office space from 1 million square feet to more than 17 million square feet. All told, as of 2008, total development spurred by the rail line was valued at more than $5 billion.
valued at more than $5 billion.\textsuperscript{xiii}

By contrast, the estimated total cost of the current HBLR line is about $2.2 billion, of which about $500 million was contributed via federal investments, the remainder of which funded by the state through the New Jersey Transportation Trust Fund and grant anticipation notes (backed by projected fare revenues).\textsuperscript{xiii}

The HBLR makes the Gold Coast a more attractive place to live and work by providing easy access to New York City and Newark via multiple transit connections, in particular the PATH transit service. Along its route, the HBLR has decreased automobile travel, improved the built and natural environment, fostered business development, increased employment, as well as raised property values and tax revenues.

From a regional perspective, by connecting to suburban commuter trains at Hoboken, ferry service, park-and-ride lots and pedestrian access between West Hoboken and Jersey City Heights, the HBLR has energized these areas as well by weaving Hudson and Bergen County more seamlessly within the greater urban fabric.

Right now, studies are underway to determine the best course of action in creating transit-oriented developments (TODs) in Hoboken, the West Side, and Bayonne. If executed well, these TODs would make the HBLR system even more successful, as each well-integrated TOD project has been seen in comparable urban areas to increase transit ridership by 20 to 40 percent.\textsuperscript{xiv} The current and proposed expansions offer great potential to build on the success of the HBLR in creating an even more dynamic urban environment, creating additional economic opportunities and

Successful, well-integrated TOD projects can increase transit ridership by 20 to 40 percent.
accommodating growth while improving quality of life.

In order to make this a reality, we’re calling on our leaders to make the HBLR and projects like it a priority for transportation investments by taking the following approaches.

**Increasing investment in public transportation** to include light rail and transit, high-speed rail, and better walking and biking by:

- Prioritizing funding for transit and cleaner transportation options that will help create sustainable communities like those developing in the Hudson-Bergen corridor, accompanied by the crucial benefits of reducing oil consumption and pollution; and
- “Flexing” more eligible state and federal funding toward public transportation. State departments of transportation have enormous latitude on how federal money is spent once it is allocated to the state. Frequently, it is directed towards projects that do little to reduce oil dependence or pollution, since federal funding is apportioned to each state based on formulas which end up rewarding higher fuel consumption, lane-miles of highway, and VMT. These formulas should be revised so funding provides incentives to reduce, not increase, oil use and pollution.

**Leveling the playing field in terms of funding and approving transit projects relative to road projects.** Two sets of rules govern the process for approving new capital investments in transit and highway projects. The bar for new capital investment in transit is much higher, and the federal match ratio much lower than for highway development. Approval of transit and highway capital investments should be governed by an equivalent set of rules and matching ratios.

**Increasing funding for transit maintenance and day-to-day operations, in addition to improving and expanding capacity.** Transit systems like the HBLR face growing demand, but are having to reduce service and/or raise fares in order to stay afloat. Federal, state and local funds should allow for greater flexibility in funding operations - new buses and trains are useless without drivers to drive them and mechanics to maintain them.

By adopting these approaches, we can strengthen the HBLR and create a future where everyone can travel for work, shop
and play on projects like it. The rapid growth of the system and its widespread appeal demonstrate the demand and potential for good public transportation. It is imperative that policy and investments accentuate and accelerate this trend in order to achieve energy independence, reduce pollution, and make our communities more vibrant and livable.

Copyright 2009 – Environment New Jersey Research and Policy Center

Endnotes

2 Regional Transportation Statistics, NYC Metropolitan Transportation Council 2007, 2008
3 2009 Public Transportation Factbook, American Public Transportation Association, April 2009
4 Pay-As-You-Drive Pricing and Insurance Regulatory Objectives, Todd Litman, Journal of Insurance Regulation 23 (3); 2005

v ICF International
vii Cost-Effective GHG Reductions through Smart Growth & Improved Transportation Choices, Center for Clean Air Policy, June 2009
ix High Cost of Fossil Fuels: Why America Can’t Afford to Depend on Dirty Energy, Environment America Research and Policy Center, June 2009
x The Transit Savings Report, American Public Transportation Association, October 2009
xi Transportation for Tomorrow, National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission, December 2007
xii Land Development at Selected Hudson-Bergen Light Rail Stations, Martin Robins and Jan Wells, Edward G. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy – Rutgers University, April 2008
xiv Light Rail and the American City, Parsons Brinkerhoff, November 2003