

NJT Central Harbor Line

Constructed between 1899 - 1913 by the PRR.

Interchanged with CNJ Southern Division (Branch to Lawndale complete in 1919) and Tuckerton Railroad (Extended from Tuckerton in 1902) in Buena Harbor.

Electrified in 1932 from Jefferson Park to Angelica, extended to Buena Harbor in 1935. Commuter trains were headed by MP54 EMUs and Steam was used over the branch for freight traffic.

Most commuter services are from an interchange with northeast corridor trains, however, direct NYC/PHI to Buena Harbor commuter trains began in 1923. With the economic downturn in 1929, these services were reduced to one per day. Local services were reduced from 16 trains a day to 6.

During the Second World War, the traffic of the line climbed and surpassed pre-depression numbers, with Buena Harbor hosting a coast guard base used for sending war supplies and men to the front. Along with an airfield between Angelica and West Blockton. Also, in 1940 the Tuckerton Railroad was abandoned and the line to Buena Harbor was removed in 1942.

Entering the post-war era on a high note, the PRR began an express service from NY Penn to Buena Harbor dubbed "The Coastal Clipper." However, these numbers weren't to last as through 1947-1955, the line saw a steady yet slowly dwindling ridership but an increase in freight with the opening of a new harbor in Buena Harbor and the opening of Norris Aggregates, which began operating 4 mines just south of Lawndale.

In 1957, with the end of PRR steam and the beginning of the downturn in the northeastern rail industry, the PRR began the process of de-electrifying the line to cut operating cost and by 1960, the last electrified service from Lees Hope to Jefferson Park as a farewell to electrification. Diesel power commuter services began as early as 1958.

After a decade of planning, the PRR merged with NYC forming Penn Central in 1968. PC put a heavier concern over the freight on the line, considering Buena Harbor was busier than ever. The completion of the Garden State Parkway in 1957 allowed increased truck traffic into the harbor. The commuter operations suffered, however, with the line's ridership dropping by 50% since 1960, PC operated very few services along the branch averaging about 2-4 per day in 1969

While PC struggled to turn a profit and with bankruptcy on the horizon, PC suspended all commuter services over the branch in 1971 and freight began to turn more towards trucking as PC was not meeting customer fulfillment, leading to a reduction in freight traffic. In 1970, Norris Aggregate was closed and freight traffic went from 5 trains per week to 2 per week. In 1970, PC enter into bankruptcy, and in 1974 PC merged with many other northeastern competitors to form

the Consolidated Rail Corporation (Conrail). In 1974, after an assessment of the line agreed to abandon the line in its entirety. Citing the poor track maintenance and lack of customers in the region willing to work with Conrail. The line sat abandoned for 5 years until 1979 and the formation of New Jersey Transit. NJDOT already had ownership of the line after Conrails abandonment, funds were drawn up to improve and upgrade the line back into a commuter line. With the groundbreaking of the rehabilitation in 1980, over the next 13 years, the project was plagued by delays, lack of funds, and failure to comply with new EPA regulations near Buena Harbor. The project however was completed in early 1993 and services started later in the year. Amtrak had an interest in running NYP/PHI > Buena Harbor and was tested over the span of 1994, but the test showed low ridership and Amtrak was out of the now Central Harbor Line.

NJT maintained to keep a steady ridership throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s. During this time freight was not on the agenda as Buena Harbor had fallen into disrepair by 1984. Shipments continued via truck-to-ship connection but no rail. In 2002, the town of Buena Harbor reclaimed the majority of the land around the main harbor and announced a multi-million dollar plan to rehabilitate Buena Harbor and regain its footing as a port. These plans included a partnership with the SRNJ as the main operator. SRNJ purchased the former CNJ Lawndale branch in 1998 to reach the former Norris Aggregate plants, which had a new mining operation on the former location. SRNJ owned the old interchange with the PRR just outside of Lawndale and planned on rehabilitating the area as a base for freight in and out of Buena Harbor. NJT approved SRNJ trackage rights over the Central Harbor Line between off-peak commuter hours. Ground broke in 2002 and the project was completed in 2004. The new complex included trans load facilities for sand products, 10 warehouses with industrial spurs, and a 5-track yard for storage. SRNJ had a significant amount invested in the infrastructure and began operation as soon as the first plant opened its doors. SRNJ and Buena Harbor saw an increase in traffic over the next 5 years from switching once a week to switching 3-4 times a week. Trans-loading was the biggest factor at the new complex, SRNJ moves rough 100 car loads in days switching; nearly half being sand, gravel, and stone.

With the increasing freight traffic and not to be left out of the region's newfound growth, Conrail Shared Assets Operations (CSAO) looked to NJT for access from Jefferson Park to Buena Harbor with a handful of customers along the way. NJT at first denied CSAO access citing freight traffic would impede NJT commuter services and require additional infrastructure not currently fitted on the line. CSAO countered by submitting plans for a yard in Crestline on the former PRR MOW yard site along with new siding near the Duquesne and Crestline. NJT approves the plan and granted access in 2005 and began serving customers in Duquesne, West Blockton, Lawndale, and Buena Harbor. Buena Harbor became most essential and traffic increased and CSAO began to alternate days with SRNJ for unloading cars dockside.

As of today, NJT operates 8-10 trains a day, with SRNJ switching Buena 3 times a week and CSAO running local trains twice a week. In 2012, NJT began looking to re-electrifying the Central Harbor line and in 2019, NJT started the installation of new overhead catenary poles and wires. Reaching as far as lees hope with plans to reach Buena Harbor for full electrification since 1960

