

# NJ Transit dragging feet on station lease

BY PHILIP DEVENCENTIS  
Of Suburban News

**WALDWICK** – Walk past the borough's dilapidated train station today and hear the tweeting of birds nesting in the gutters, see the roof caving in and a chimney about to collapse, lick your lips and taste mold and mildew, smell the rotted, weathered wood, feel the slow decay of what was once a roost for 19th century commuters and sense the reverberations of long-lost steam locomotives. That's history.

Rundown and decrepit, the station sits on Hewson Avenue, serving as the borough's focal point by sheer default.

But now the Waldwick Community Alliance, a group of local business owners dedicated to "revitalizing" the borough's historic district, has expressed interest in acquiring the station for restoration.

The alliance is interested in transforming the station – abandoned since the 1970s – into a museum complete with artifacts, photographs and train memorabilia.

Douglas Cowie, vice president of the alliance, said he has been working diligently to lease the station from NJ Transit for nine months.

"We have developed and submitted plans for station restoration, only to be rejected time and again," Cowie said. "It's obvious that NJ Transit does not want to lease the building even though they have publicly claimed to be in favor of our plan."

Because the train station is listed on both state and federal historic registries, the building cannot be destroyed, Cowie said.

"Instead of simply bulldozing the building, Transit has decided to practice 'demolition by neglect,'" Cowie charges. "They are slowly demolishing the station by refusing to maintain it."

Costs to restore the station are steep.

Preliminary estimates for the preservation and repair of the station are about \$1 million, and NJ Transit is even charging the alliance \$500 to assess the interior of the building. So far, Cowie said, the alliance has raised about \$22,000.

Cowie said the station is of no use to NJ Transit because it is on the wrong side of the tracks. They are in the process of doing other "mega-projects" and cannot be bothered, he claimed.

"NJ Transit is a quasi-state agency, above municipal law," Cowie said. "They are the Goliath, and they don't bow to anyone."

And, according to Cowie, NJ Transit community relations representative Jim McDermott has publicly announced that the train station is an unwanted burden.

At a meeting at the Waldwick Borough Hall on Nov. 11, 2006, Cowie said McDermott said the following:

"The Waldwick train station is an albatross around NJ Transit's neck, and we're willing to do just about anything to get it off our books."

What's more, Cowie said McDermott promised a drafted lease two weeks following that meeting.

McDermott has denied these claims, while Transit spokesman Dan Stessel said Transit is more than willing to grant a 25-year lease as long as the alliance meets



PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUGLAS COWIE

For the better part of a year, the Waldwick Community Alliance has tried without success to lease the borough's abandoned and dilapidated train station from NJ Transit. The alliance has proposed to renovate the building and transform it into a museum.

State Historic Preservation Office regulations.

Stessel said selling the station or granting a 99-year lease are not options because Transit may have to add an extra track and move the station to accommodate one of its "mega-projects" – a direct line to New York City.

Borough officials say they have supported the alliance's uphill struggle, but Cowie said he believes the alliance has made little progress in finalizing a lease agreement with NJ Transit because Waldwick officials have refused to officially join forces with them. More pressure needs to be applied by the borough, Cowie said.

Borough Administrator Gary Kratz said that while the mayor and council have continued to

offer moral encouragement to the alliance, the borough is not interested in becoming a signatory on the lease agreement because doing so would detract from the volunteer mindset of the undertaking. Grants are better available to non-profit organizations, he said.

Mayor Rick VanderWende said he will continue to support "revitalization" while encouraging state legislators to advocate for the alliance's grassroots efforts. VanderWende said he most recently spoke with Sen. Gerald Cardinale on Memorial Day.

"I appreciate the alliance's frustration," VanderWende said. "But the borough has not discussed becoming a lessee, and we are still optimistic that the station will be turned over."

On June 8, Assemblyman John Rooney drafted a letter to Patrick O'Connor, senior director of government and community relations for NJ Transit, urging Transit officials to work with the alliance.

In his letter, Rooney declared "if NJ Transit is not willing to repair

and maintain the station itself, it must allow concerned and proactive citizens to complete the project."

In an interview, NJ Transit spokesman Joe Dee said Transit is continuing to work carefully to ensure proper handoff of the station.

"NJ Transit is continuing to work internally and with the alliance to determine what makes sense and whether the alliance has the resources available to comply with restoration requirements," Dee said.

However, one of these requirements, Cowie said, is proof of financing. He said applying for state historic preservation grants is a piecemeal process that may take years. Also, non-profit groups cannot apply for grants without a lease, he said.

"The station as it stands continues to be a blight on our area," Cowie said, "and we just keep spinning our wheels."

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## HIGH SCHOOL NEWS

■ As a result of their outstanding scores on the National Latin Exam, 34 Ramapo Indian Hills students received awards, including gold medals for summa cum laude, silver medals for maxima cum laude, and certificates for magna cum laude and cum laude.

The following students were recognized with gold medals: Jamie Yuzawa, Kevin Lee, Lisa Han, Tom Hoesly, Eva Kunkera, Paul Singman, Kevin O'Connor, Nathaniel Mowell, and Tyler Hall. Silver medals went to Harry Maguire, Rebecca Coffman, Tom Verga, Jessica Garcia, Matt Sclafani, Carol Stoll, Jamie Miller, Connor Turpan, Kirsten Marshall, Cristen Cusumano, and Hannah Kim. Ryan Whitely, Jacalyn DeValue, Tom Hayden, Ryo Hanasaki, Bobby O'Connor, Eric Jordan, Adam Reinitz, Erin McKenna, Aly Long and Dan Wild received magna cum laude awards, while Victoria Harty, Allison Taylor, Blair Uhlig, and Adam Nolte won the cum laude designation for their performances.

■ Cassie Porter and Matt Cha

are the 2007 Honor Graduates at Ramapo and Indian Hills High Schools respectively.

This prestigious award, announced each year at graduation, is presented to the student at each district high school who best exemplifies leadership, scholarship, and service. A faculty committee at each school makes the selection. The winner's name is engraved on a plaque displayed in the school.

■ Daniel Berardo is the Ramapo valedictorian and Jaimie Berger and Ryan Jacobs are the school's salutatorians. The top graduates at Indian Hills are valedictorian Tayyab Shaikh and salutatorian Ashley Bava.

■ At their annual luncheon, the Bergen County Elementary and Middle School Administrators' Association presented Sarah Zimmermann of Indian Hills High School with a scholarship. The award was based on scholarship, citizenship, extra curricular activities, leadership, and character. Sarah will attend the University of Scranton to major in elementary education.