

# Rails to Rowan

*Trains could link rowan's past and future*

By Glenn Koppelman '85

It's literally a shell of its former self. Situated on the same dusty spot since it was moved there in 1892 it now fights a losing battle for space with countless bushes and weeds. The old Glassboro railroad station last greeted a commuter on Feb 5, 1971, and has fallen into disrepair ever since. It stands within sight of the Bunce Hall tower, a blur in the landscape as students and staff whiz into the College parking lot off Whitney Avenue. But the era that it represented may be returning in the not-too-distant future as state transportation officials eye the borough as a host for a passenger rail station. Local politicians and residents welcome the idea, and officials at Rowan College have endorsed the project as well. "This has been a start-and-stop proposal for a long time," says Robert A. Harris '61, '74, director of civic and governmental relations at Rowan.

"People in this region should be allowed to get on a train and go to the Camden waterfront and the aquarium. It should connect this region a lot better than it is now." While the tentative plans don't call for the first passenger trains to return to Glassboro until after the turn of the century, they could have a significant effect on Rowan, a school that arguably owes its very existence to the trains that

used to bring students to the borough regularly. Glassboro was already a railroad town when a location for the school was being scouted in the early 1920s, and the latest proposal may give the college an extra boost as it goes through one of its biggest expansion stages.

Rowan College trustees have approved a resolution that "strongly supports" the concept. A position paper accompanying the resolution points out that 5,000 of the school's 9,000 students now commute. The paper also suggests the college's new programs and its goals of offering doctorate degrees and attaining university status could benefit from a passenger rail link. "We have been cooperating in any way possible to see this happen," says Harris. "Higher education has no meaning unless you have access to it."

The state has been moving steadily forward with the project, spurred by federal funding earmarked for relieving transportation congestion in the fast-growing region. According to Ken Miller, a spokesman for NJ Transit, which is overseeing the project, the initial study phase has been completed. The next phase will entail studying environmental and safety concerns, narrowing the options being considered and determining the costs. The final decision, says

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Miller, will depend largely on what NJ Transit hears from the public. “We’re just trying to gather input from the community,” he says.

Among the possibilities NJ Transit is considering is the construction of high-speed lines along routes 42 and 55 and Interstate 295, which would connect to the PATCO network in Camden County. Another idea is building an elevated rail line directly to Glassboro, which would operate much like the present PATCO system. But the option that seems to be eyed the most is one that would use the existing Conrail lines for a slower light-rail service that would link with the high-speed network. “That’s pretty much what the public has stated in the past,” says Miller.

Public support or the lack of it is one factor that could affect the project. As railroad historian Don Wentzel notes, to be successful, NJ Transit will have to change attitudes that have been ingrained for the past several years. “People haven’t ridden the train down here since the ‘50s. People got out of the habit,” he says.

Wentzel knows well the way things used to be. As railroad editor for South Jersey Magazine, he keeps his Millville home stocked with extensive records of railroad history and lore, including business reports, old timetables and vintage photos. He notes that Glassboro was a major link in the West Jersey & Seashore Railroad for decades before the college existed, offering regular electrified train service between Camden, Millville and Bridgeton since 1906. Depending on where the person wanted to go, a train would be along every hour or half-hour. “Electric lines were hot stuff when the college was built,” says Wentzel.

When the college was opened, the railway started running a special train between Woodbury and Glassboro just

for students, designed to drop them off in the morning and pick them up in the evening. The company also sold student tickets at a reduced rate. Such accommodations by the railroad were a sound business move. “Logic would say more kids came from out of town than lived in Glassboro. You would assume that’s how they got there—by train,” he says. “It’s safe to say up until 1940, the majority of students arrived by train.”

The 1940s signaled the beginning of the end for the passenger trains. The local train companies were huffing financially even before then, and in 1933 a merger turned the West Jersey & Seashore Railroad into the Pennsylvania-Reading Seashore Lines, which has since become Conrail. The newly merged railroad’s fortunes didn’t change, and in the late ‘40s the company started ripping up the electric rail lines. By 1971, says Wentzel, only one self-propelled diesel passenger car, or “Budd” car, came to Glassboro daily. Since ‘71, only freight trains have passed through town.

NJ Transit’s design to reverse that trend is something Wentzel would like to see succeed, but he is still uncertain whether it will. He hopes the old-fashioned, give-the-customers-what-they-want approach may win over enough converts willing to ditch their cars for a while. “The PATCO line certainly has been successful,” he says, “and that proves you can get the people back—providing you offer frequent service at a reasonable price.” ■