

Regional Rail in Syracuse, NY: A Case and Concept for Renewed Service

By Chris LaBerge



December 2009

Prepared for CRP 3840: Green Cities

Introduction

Most people, including many Syracuse area residents, are surprised to find out that the city has had local rail service in the modern era. As recently as 2007, however, Syracuse was the smallest city in the country with a regional rail line. Ontrack, an excursion train system operated by New York, Susquehanna and Western Railroad in partnership with Onondaga County, began service in 1994 as a means of enhancing tourism and linking popular destinations. Limited ridership ultimately doomed Ontrack, though, and now Syracuse is again without a train.

Looking ahead, however, now might just be the right time to reinstate or start a new service. Taking into consideration the economic goals of Syracuse and the region, growing concerns about the environment and global warming, ever increasing fuel costs and the growing disparity between rich and poor, a new train service could be a valuable asset in addressing several of those issues at once. In order to give an idea of how such a system could be implemented and the type of success it might have, this report looks back at the history of Ontrack to see what was wrong with that service, what factors make rail service more viable now, and what changes would need to be made for a new regional rail service to maximize its ridership, efficiency and value to the community.

A recent history of rail service in Syracuse

Beginnings

Ontrack was initially conceived by a Syracuse University student who, seeing the existing rail infrastructure in the city, proposed implementing a passenger service.¹ The idea eventually caught on and gained momentum in the local political arena. The ten miles of track that were to be used ran from the Village of Jamesville in the south to Carousel Center to the north, and were owned and operated by Conrail at the time. Fortunately for Syracuse and its rail

¹ Personal Interview with Robert Colucci, former Ontrack manager, 23 Nov 2009

fans, Conrail was more than happy to get rid of the segment, which cost them \$200,000 annually in property taxes, was deteriorating structurally and had few freight customers. After brief negotiations, Conrail sold the tracks to the Onondaga County Industrial Development Agency for \$1, and the wheels began rolling towards bringing regional rail to Syracuse.²

Shortly after purchasing the track from Conrail, the Onondaga IDA leased the track to the Delaware Otsego Corporation, owners of the New York, Susquehanna and Western Railroad. Under the lease agreement, NYSW was required to run a passenger service 250 days of the year, with at least 1,250 regularly scheduled round trips. Three hundred fifty of those could be real “excursion” trips: trains to Tully to see leaves in the fall, trips to Watkins Glenn to watch a race, and other similar events around the region.³ Failure to meet the service requirement would result in NYSW being fined \$100,000, but this stipulation only applied to the first four years of the deal.⁴ The railroad would also be responsible for future track repairs and insurance payments, and would pay the IDA \$2,000 a year in rent plus a five percent of operating revenues.⁵

In exchange for all of this, the railroad would be allowed to run freight over the rails, and would receive a \$400,000 annual tax break. Funding for the initial necessary improvements and upgrades to the track, purchase of equipment, including the four Budd Rail diesel cars to be used for passenger service, and construction of new facilities would be paid for by a \$4.5 million grant from the state, \$400,000 dollars of which was devoted to the construction of stops at the planned regional transportation center and baseball stadium. In order to provide service to those stops, NYSW needed to replace or construct a bridge over Park Street, between Carousel Center and the site of the

² Eisenstadt, Marie. “\$400,000 for a train that never came.” Syracuse Post-Standard 11 Nov 2007: A1

³ Scobey, Katherine. “Making tracks for Downtown.” Syracuse Herald American 18 Sept 1994: C1

⁴ Eisenstadt, Marie. “\$400,000 for a train that never came.” Syracuse Post-Standard 11 Nov 2007: A1

⁵ Scobey, Katherine. “Making tracks for Downtown.” Syracuse Herald American 18 Sept 1994: C1

transportation center, and this funding would later be secured by an additional \$3 million dollar state grant.⁶

Ontrack starts service

Before the agreement was signed, New York, Susquehanna and Western went through a thorough process estimating ridership and revenues. Based on the number of visitors annually to destinations like Carousel Mall, the science museum and restaurants downtown, and the university, the railroad estimated a ridership base of 11.3 million, over 158,000 of which would take the daily shuttle on an annual basis. With the initiation of service planned for September or October of 1994, 45,300 riders were expected by the end of that year, comprised entirely of tourists and rail fans. Commuter usage was expected to be virtually nonexistent, and the company planned to take a loss in operating the City Express shuttle. The profits would be made, they planned, on the special excursion trips and the Orange Express, a special train for events at Syracuse University's Carrier Dome.⁷

Despite these initial projections, Ontrack outperformed all expectations. Thanks to the Syracuse news outlets, public awareness was high at the outset of service and generated much excitement in the community. By December 12, 1994, Ontrack's self-propelled diesel cars had already carried 45,757 passengers, many of whom were commuters who chose to park at stops and take the train or to transfer over from the bus. Excursion and Orange Express route also outperformed planned numbers, and operating revenues were higher than initially assumed, although the daily shuttle service was still losing a relatively mild \$5,000 a week.⁸

Encouraged by the performance, NYSW employees in charge of Ontrack stated that expansions in service were being planned, including a commuter

⁶ Eisenstadt, Marie. "\$400,000 for a train that never came." Syracuse Post-Standard 11 Nov 2007: A1

⁷ Scobey, Katherine. "Making tracks for Downtown." Syracuse Herald American 18 Sept 1994: C1

⁸ Hannagan, Charles. "Ontrack a surprising success." Syracuse Post-Standard 6 Feb 1995: BB9

service to Jamesville and longer operating hours. The aforementioned bridge project to link with the transportation center and stadium were also causes for optimism, and promised to bring more riders. Furthermore, managers said that advertising space was to be sold on trains and at Ontrack facilities, and corporate sponsors and subsidies were in the works. The additions of these revenue streams would finance expansion and improvement of service, and promised to only make the railroad more of an asset.⁹

Ontrack declines

Following the initial successes for Ontrack in 1994 and 1995, things gradually turned sour. Planned expansions of services and hours were never made and work on the new Park Street bridge was halted because of complaints from the other local railroad operator, CSX, keeping the vital connection to the transportation center from being made. Advertising space was not sold, and no corporate sponsors were obtained. The railroad also did virtually nothing to advertise for any of Ontrack's services, and ridership fell off significantly. In response, the railroad reduced operating hours more and more, further undermining its already diminishing number of riders.¹⁰

Though it was not apparent until late in the service life of Ontrack, what NYSW had been doing was diverting the grant money and tax breaks intended to sustain the Ontrack services towards improving its most profitable freight lines. The \$400,000 annual tax break was exploited to maximize profits from running freight, and NYSW boasted well maintained track thanks to the tax payers of the state.¹¹

Without advertising and a sustained presence in the community, ridership was reduced to almost nothing by the time all services were suspended in 2007. At the time operations ended, Ontrack averaged only 50 riders a day, a shadow

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ Eisenstadt, Marie. "\$400,000 for a train that never came." Syracuse Post-Standard 11 Nov 2007: A1

¹¹ *Ibid*

of what it had once been. Commuters use of the City Express was minimal, though university students still patronized the railroad frequently. Facing mounting losses and with little support, New York, Susquehanna and Western felt there was no way they could continue the service.¹²

The Case for renewed service

Though the city's experiences with Ontrack lead many to the conclusion that commuter rail is not a worthwhile or cost effective venture, there are many reasons to believe just the opposite. Besides the fact that NYSW was Ontrack's worst enemy, doing nothing to maintain its presence in the community and nothing to sustain or improve ridership, demand for a regional rail service could still be high if run correctly. A few other arguments for implementing new service are also briefly outlined below:

Why is this a good project today?

- The tracks for the system link Syracuse's most popular destinations

Unfortunately, for most of its history the city of Syracuse and the surrounding areas have developed without a comprehensive plan. As a result, the centers of culture, entertainment, and shopping were developed almost completely disconnected from one another, and inaccessible except by car. Ontrack was once seen as a remedy to this situation, and a renewed train service could fill a similar role. With improvements made, the train's ease of use would be a major incentive for riders to travel between points of interest and would be a generator of ridership.

- Rail transit is a proven catalyst for economic development

¹² *Ibid*

From the city and county's point of view, a new train service is desirable because of the economic benefits. Research has shown that investments in physical infrastructure, including mass transit and light rail, increases private sector investment and productivity, increases property values, and creates jobs. It also has the added benefit of creating centers of activity and increasing the appearance of an area as vibrant and modern, two factors which further stimulate local economic gains.¹³

- Parking issues downtown

There are currently dozens of office and retail spaces that sit vacant in downtown Syracuse due, in large part, to the lack of parking. In fact, in 2007, Excellus Blue Cross Blue Shield, a major downtown employer, relocated its regional headquarters out of downtown because of lack of employee parking and lack of solutions offered by the city.¹⁴ With a new and improved commuter service in place, parking concerns could be mitigated, especially for many city residents and suburbanites living to the north, south and east. Many would find it preferable to walk, bike or park their car at a stop and take the train into downtown than navigating traffic and dealing with the hassles of finding and paying for parking. This would also take a number of cars off the road, decrease fuel consumption and greenhouse gases emitted.

Why is this a good project in the future?

- Impending reconstruction of Interstate 81 through the city

The New York State department of transportation has said for more than ten years that the elevated portions of Interstate 81 which run through downtown Syracuse are going to need a complete overhaul in the coming

¹³ Zettle, Adam. "Rail transit as a source of economic development." University of Michigan Economic Development Handbook 19 April 2005 < <http://www.umich.edu/~econdev/rail/>>

¹⁴ "Excellus Gives Up on City." Syracuse Post-Standard 24 July 2007: A1

years. This section of the highway, which has been standing since 1967, is a major artery for traffic for the city, and its reconstruction will prove a major disturbance to businesses, residents and visitors.¹⁵ To prepare, the city and county should pursue a train service as an alternative means of transportation during and after construction. Such an alternative would have high demand as it would be far less stressful and wasteful than taking detours through tight city streets, and would prevent some fuel waste generated by grid lock and increased stop and go driving.

- Greenhouse gases, global warming and sustainability

Based on 2007 estimates by the EPA, the transportation sector in the United States contributes nearly 31% of all carbon dioxide emissions.¹⁶ Much of that comes from the use of automobiles which, because of standard single occupant usage, are much less efficient than mass transit systems like rail. A rail system like the one proposed would get more passenger miles per gallon of fuel than a standard automobile¹⁷, reducing the amount of fuel used and greenhouse gases emitted per person.

- Oil prices are guaranteed to go back up, increasing demand for public transportation

Many reliable sources estimate that conventional oil production will peak within the next ten to twenty years.¹⁸ This will mean a more limited supply of gasoline, increasing prices and driving more people to take public transit. A good system, like the train service, needs to be in place many

¹⁵ Onondaga County Citizens League. Rethinking I-81. 2009. 10 Nov 2009 <http://onondagacitizensleague.org/ocl_studies/index.htm>

¹⁶ United States. Environmental Protection Agency. 2009 US Greenhouse Gas Inventory Report, Executive Summary. April 2009. 20 Nov 2009 <<http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/downloads09/GHG2007-ES-508.pdf>>

¹⁷ State of Ohio. Department of Transportation. Equipment: Locomotive vs. Diesel Hauled Multiple Units. Nov 19 2009. 1 Dec 2009 <http://www.dot.state.oh.us/Divisions/Rail/Programs/passenger/3CisME/Documents/ORDC_3C_Equipment_Presentation_111909.pdf>

¹⁸ United Kingdom Energy Research Center. The Global Oil Depletion Report. 10 Aug 2009. 10 Nov 2009 <<http://www.ukerc.ac.uk/support/tiki-index.php?page=Global+Oil+Depletion>>

years in advance of this event to lessen the impact on society and the economy. Improved transit would also be a more equitable solution to the problem, as it would provide a means of transportation for lower income people who would not be able to afford to drive in such an environment.

A concept for renewed service

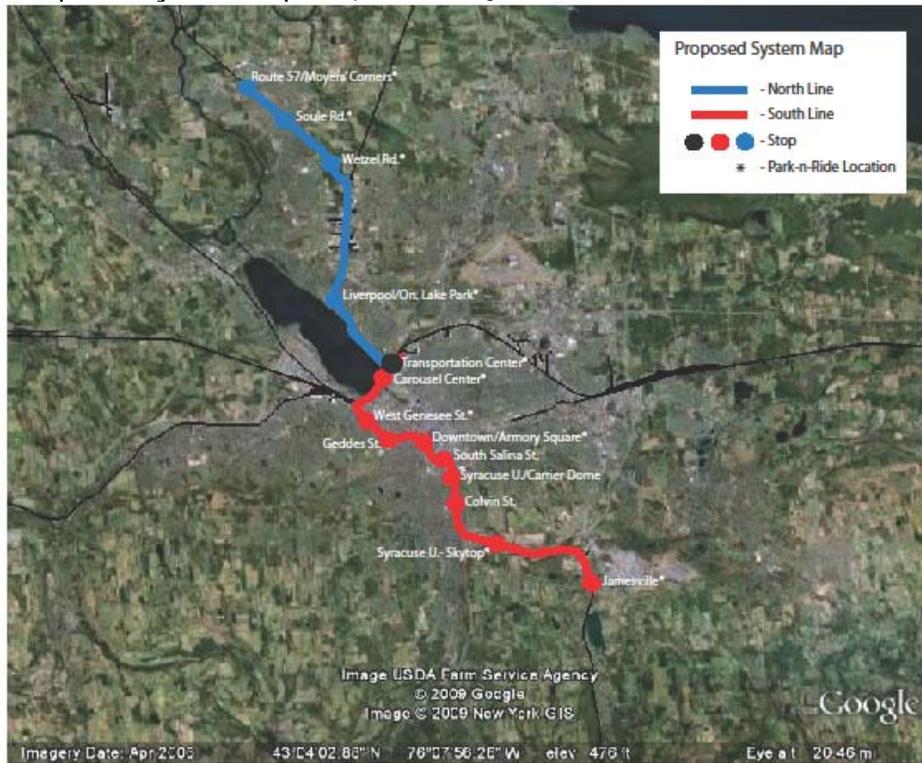
In this section, several additions and alterations to the model that Ontrack operated off of are proposed as a starting point for planning a new service. There are many other details to sort out, but these are some basic changes that would make a new rail service more useful and more successful.

Route

To meet the same demands that Ontrack did, and meet new ones, the new rail service would follow the route illustrated in Figure 1. What is labeled as the South Line on the map is the original Ontrack route, the tracks of which are still owned by the Onondaga County Industrial Development Agency. This segment of track provides the vital link between the city's major destinations, runs through several of Syracuse's dense city neighborhoods, and extends all the way to the University and the Village of Jamesville, meeting the needs of university students and commuters. The South Line should also be enhanced in the near future with the Park Street bridge link to the transportation center and stadium. This new bridge, besides being of use for a regional rail line, is listed as a necessary addition in New York state's new rail system plan in order to increase volume for high-speed rail service in Syracuse. Federal stimulus package funding for such projects should be announced by the end of this year or early next year.¹⁹

¹⁹ Personal interview with Greg Hitchin, Onondaga County IDA. 19 Aug 2009

Figure 1: Proposed system map (Map source: Google Earth, 2009)



The North Line would be an expansion of the route into the village of Liverpool and parts of North Syracuse and Clay, with stops located along busy roads to increase access for park and ride users and buses. The track for this segment is currently owned by CSX, but freight rail traffic on this route is said to be minimal, perhaps one to two trains a day, though exact numbers are not certain because CSX keeps them private for security reasons.²⁰ As a result, getting rights to use this track, or purchase the track, should not be overly difficult. Expanding the route into the northern suburbs is a necessary addition as these are the largest and fastest growing suburbs of Syracuse. Looking at statistics provided by the United States Census Bureau, almost 30% of all workers living within one and a half miles of the proposed stops work in

²⁰ *Ibid*

downtown Syracuse or at the University²¹, both of which will be served by the train.

To increase the usefulness of the system, several stops have been added to the original route in addition to the new North Line stops. Stops at West Genesee, Geddes, and South Salina Streets have been added, not only because they are located on major thoroughfares, increasing the accessibility of the service to park and ride passengers and drawing them out of their cars, but also because of their proximity to surrounding, dense neighborhoods. Having stops close to these neighborhoods will decrease residents' need for a car and give them the opportunity to just walk or bike to the train. The stop just down the hill from Syracuse University's residential Skytop campus would serve a similar purpose, and could see significantly more use as the university expands there on some of its only the available land.

Stations

To meet the needs of the old service, elaborate platforms were built at Carousel Center, the University, and Colvin Street, each at a cost of \$500,000.²² These existing stops would have to be winterized to accommodate year round service, which was originally estimated to cost \$500,000 total in 1995.²³ Similar, winterized platforms would be built at stops on the South Line, except for Jamesville, and at the stop in the Village of Liverpool. A picture of one of the existing platforms can be seen in Figure 3.

To keep costs low for other stops on the North Line and in Jamesville, the platforms would have simpler, but heated, bus stop-type shelters and parking lots sufficient for park-n-ride users. A commuter stop in New Jersey is shown in Figure 2 as an example.

²¹ Unites States. Census Bureau. Labor Employment Dynamics OnTheMap3. Commuter Shed Analysis. 2009 <<http://lehdmap3.did.census.gov/themap3/>>

²² Eisenstadt, Marie. "\$400,000 for a train that never came." Syracuse Post-Standard 11 Nov 2007: A1

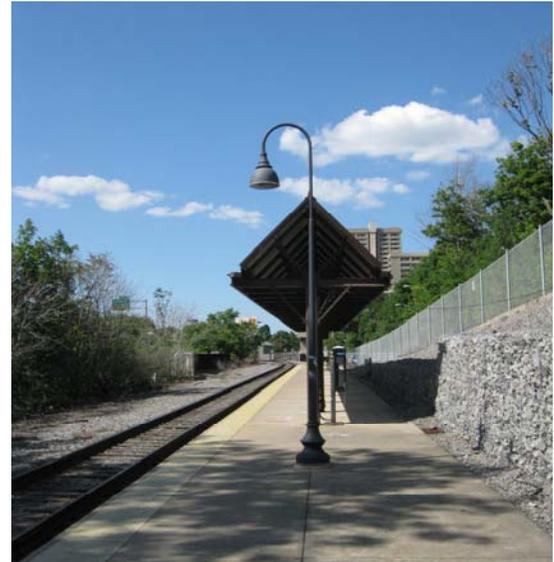
²³ Hannagan, Charles. "Ontrack a surprising success." Syracuse Post-Standard 6 Feb 1995: BB9

The main station downtown in Armory Square was renovated and a separate, dedicated platform was built at the transportation center, eliminating the need for additional facilities and updates at these locations.

Figure 3 (Picture taken 7 July 2009)



Figure 2 (Picture taken 10 Aug 2009)



Equipment

Even though an electrified route would be best and most efficient, the intense capital costs of updating the system would likely make it infeasible. During its last iteration, Ontrack used four Budd Rail diesel self-propelled cars built in the 1950's.²⁴ Though these trains performed admirably in their role, their dated technology caused them to be loud and inefficient.

To bring the system up to date and make it as efficient and environmentally-friendly as possible given the constraints on electrification, the best choice for new train equipment are modern diesel self-propelled cars, or DMU's. US Railcar, formerly Colorado Railcar, makes a DMU that is approved to operate on tracks shared with freight trains and is much quieter and efficient than the old Budd Rail units. Assuming that these cars would be outfitted with the standard Detroit Diesel Series 60 engine, the US Railcar DMU produces

²⁴ *Ibid*

significantly less emissions and has much greater fuel efficiency than previous generations of equipment.²⁵

Schedule

During its last incarnation, rail service was aimed primarily at enhancing tourism and for this goal it did not need to have an extensive schedule. Looking at the old schedule in Figure 4, it is evident that the train would have been

Figure 4 (Picture taken 10 Aug 2009) useful to some tourists,
 granted that they knew about the service, but would have been of no use to the average commuter or city resident, with service starting at 11:00 am and ending at 6:00 pm.

For a renewed service to fulfill one of its proposed roles as a commuter rail line, service would have to begin when bus service does and run for the majority of business hours. During the week this would mean starting service around 5:30 am and arriving at each stop on the half hour, continuing until 8 pm. Service could be reduced to only once an hour, on the hour during the middle of the day, say from 9 am to 4 pm, but would have to pick back up again to carry commuters in the evening. On the weekend, service could be more

limited, starting at 10 or 11 am with trains on the North Line arriving on the hour and those on the South each half hour, but would have to operate later into the night on Friday and Saturday, say

ONTRACK CITY EXPRESS SCHEDULE					
NORTHBOUND			SOUTHBOUND		
Departs Syracuse University	Armory Square (Downtown)	Arrives Carousel Center	Departs Carousel Center	Armory Square (Downtown)	Arrives Syracuse University
11:25 am	A 11:30 am D 11:35 am	11:45 am	X	D 11:15 am	11:20 am
12:25 pm	A 12:30 pm D 12:35 pm	12:45 pm	12:00 noon	A 12:10 pm D 12:15 pm	12:20
1:25	A 1:30 D 1:35	1:45	1:00	A 1:10 D 1:15	1:20
2:25	A 2:30 D 2:35	2:45	2:00	A 2:10 D 2:15	2:20
3:25	A 3:30 D 3:35	3:45	3:00	A 3:10 D 3:15	3:20
4:25	A 4:30 D 4:35	4:45	4:00	A 4:10 D 4:15	4:20
5:25	A 5:30 D 5:35	5:45	5:00	A 5:10 D 5:15	5:20
6:25	A 6:30	X	6:00	A 6:10 D 6:15	6:20

until 3 am, to meet the needs of people going out downtown or to the mall.

²⁵ Jacobs, Edwards and Kelly. Fairmount Service Line Improvements: Potential Use of DMUs. April 2008. 1 Dec 2009 < http://www.eot.state.ma.us/downloads/DMU_Fairmount.pdf>

To make this schedule possible, two trains would have to be running during rush hours, one on the North Line and one on the South Line, with the train on the North Line running in more of an express format, stopping at each suburban stop and continuing non-stop to downtown and the University. The train on the South Line would run all the way from Jamesville to the transportation center and back, stopping at each stop along the way. At several points on the route, including at the main station, the track splits into two lines and has connections back, so it would be possible for the trains to pass each other along the way and change back.

Links with existing transportation network

Currently, the Central New York Regional Transit Authority, known as Centro, operates bus service throughout Central New York and the Syracuse area. Though there are a number of commuter bus lines in place, they lag behind in ridership compared to city routes.²⁶ Part of this is probably due to the length of the trip from the suburbs to the city and also to the stigma attached with riding the bus in this country. The addition of a rail service, particularly to the suburbs, that was connected to the bus lines could break down these barriers and increase ridership for both services. This would result in a decrease of the number of automobile trips made and, consequently, the environmental impact of the Syracuse transportation system.

When it was operating, Ontrack had no affiliation with Centro and did not coordinate services. A new system would do so, however, as a means of boosting accessibility and ridership. Coordinating schedules so that buses would arrive at train stops when the trains did would make the system efficient and convenient for commuters and other passengers.

Marketing and Ridership Incentives

²⁶ Personal Interview with Casey Brown, CENTRO. 17 Nov 2009

One of the major reasons for the failure of Ontrack was the lack of marketing for the service and failure to set up any kind of incentive program or subsidy. To attract and retain riders, a new service would have market effectively and provide plenty of reasons to take the train. A few marketing efforts and incentive programs are outlined below:

- Painting the service name on bridges and putting up signs on its most visible stations. Under the proposed configuration, the train will pass over 17 bridges, many of over major roads, and will have 3 stops visible from Interstate 81. Having the name of the train service constantly visible will keep in the minds and thought process of people in the community.
- Bringing the attention of the media and Syracuse University newspapers to the new service. News outlets played a critical role in exciting the public when Ontrack first appeared.
- Developing an effective and easy-to-use website. All good transit services have a well-developed website, and creating one with full schedules, a trip planner and an interactive map with popular destinations near stops would be a big boost. Also, the addition of a calendar of events will cause riders to be aware of when they could take the train to do something fun.
- Working with the IDA or local businesses to subsidize rider passes. This will decrease parking costs from their perspective and increase ridership.
- Working with Syracuse University to subsidize passes for students. Failure to do so was a major blow to Ontrack as students were among the most frequent users. Reduced price passes would stir greater student interest and get more of them riding.

Conclusion

When Ontrack service was discontinued in 2007, Syracuse and the surrounding area lost a unique and valuable part of the community. Though many are discouraged by this event, the potential value a regional rail service has for the area is undeniable. Under responsible management and with some changes and additions made, new rail service in Syracuse could benefit the community greatly. Not only could such a service enhance economic development, especially in downtown Syracuse, but could also create a more equitable and sustainable transportation system for the members of the community. Starting a new service would not only make Syracuse unique among other medium-sized cities, but would further advance the city's efforts to be competitive with any city in the 21st century.

Bibliography

Eisenstadt, Marie. "\$400,000 for a train that never came." Syracuse Post-Standard 11 Nov 2007: A1

Google Maps, Map of Syracuse area 2009

Hannagan, Charles. "Ontrack a surprising success." Syracuse Post-Standard 6 Feb 1995: BB9

Jacobs, Edwards and Kelly. Fairmount Service Line Improvements: Potential Use of DMUs. April 2008. 1 Dec 2009 <
http://www.eot.state.ma.us/downloads/DMU_Fairmount.pdf>

Onondaga County Citizens League. Rethinking I-81. 2009. 10 Nov 2009
<http://onondagacitizensleague.org/ocl_studies/index.htm>

Personal Interview with Casey Brown, CENTRO. 17 Nov 2009

Personal interview with Greg Hitchin, Onondaga County IDA. 19 Aug 2009

Personal Interview with Robert Colucci, former Ontrack manager, 23 Nov 2009

Scobey, Katherine. "Making tracks for Downtown." Syracuse Herald American 18 Sept 1994: C1

State of Ohio. Department of Transportation. Equipment: Locomotive vs. Diesel Hauled Multiple Units. Nov 19 2009. 1 Dec 2009 <
http://www.dot.state.oh.us/Divisions/Rail/Programs/passenger/3CisME/Documents/ORDC_3C_Equipment_Presentation_111909.pdf>

Syracuse Post-Standard. "Excellus Gives Up on City." 24 July 2007: A1

United Kingdom Energy Research Center. The Global Oil Depletion Report. 10 Aug 2009. 10 Nov 2009 < <http://www.ukerc.ac.uk/support/tiki-index.php?page=Global+Oil+Depletion>>

United States. Census Bureau. Labor Employment Dynamics OnTheMap3. Commuter Shed Analysis. 2009 <<http://lehdmap3.did.census.gov/themap3/>>

United States. Environmental Protection Agency. 2009 US Greenhouse Gas Inventory Report, Executive Summary. April 2009. 20 Nov 2009 <

[http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/downloads09 /GHG2007-ES-508.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/downloads09/GHG2007-ES-508.pdf)>

Zettle, Adam. "Rail transit as a source of economic development." University of Michigan Economic Development Handbook 19 April 2005 <
<http://www.umich.edu/~econdev/rail/>>