

News and Notes from The LIRR Today

November 2, 2014

A SPOOKY AND CRAZY HALLOWEEN WEEK FOR THE LIRR

Halloween is traditionally known as a spooky and crazy holiday, but this year, the few days leading up to All Hollows Eve were a particularly crazy few for the LIRR.

The week started off quiet with the only notable disruption on Monday coming when train 2747 experienced significant equipment trouble in Islip (and the way the Montauk Branch is signaled in this area, when you lose one track, you end up losing both).

Tuesday the 28th started out very well—there was a perfect morning rush period (the 17th of the year), where all AM peak trains arrived at their western terminals on-time. However, the rest of that day would certainly not go as smoothly as it did in the morning for the LIRR. The day began to slip from the LIRR's hands when train 2712 (the 4:30pm train from Hunterspoint Avenue to Montauk) became disabled on track 5 in Jamaica. That train was livened up after a short while, but the delay left it in an awkward gap on the Main Line, running behind a local, and head of an express. For the remainder of the rush hour, there were some minor delays scattered systemwide, but there were no significantly delayed trains. Even some signal trouble at HAROLD or F interlockings towards the end of the rush hour didn't appear to set the LIRR that far back.

However, things went from okay to bad for the LIRR and its passengers when service on the Main Line was suspended around 8:00pm due to a trespasser strike near the Clinton Street grade crossing in Farmingdale. Details were thin at first, but it became clear after a short while that this was no ordinary trespasser strike. As [multiple news agencies](#) reported, Nassau County Police also discovered a beheaded body nearby and were investigating the incident as part of a potential murder-suicide. The incident train, 2082 (the 7:11pm train from New York to Ronkonkoma) was stuck for hours, and the Main Line was tied up for most of the night. Passengers on the incident train were transferred to a rescue train (using train 2084's equipment) and brought back to Hicksville. Once the LIRR began to notice the severity of the disruption, busses were ordered to begin moving several trainloads worth of people who had been building up at Hicksville to the east. A dual mode set that

had been brought to the North Side Track at Hicksville from Jamaica was later used to transport passengers stranded at Hicksville down to Montauk Branch stations (additionally, service to Huntington and Port Jefferson was also muddling through the disruption, so additional passengers fled to the north). Train service on the Main Line wasn't restored until early Wednesday morning. The full magnitude of just how many trains were delayed as a result of this incident won't become known until Wednesday 11/3.

But the strange incident in Farmingdale wasn't the only strange thing to happen to the LIRR's Main Line that week. Similar to Tuesday, Wednesday the 28th started out very well for the LIRR—there were only four late trains in the morning rush hour period. The evening rush also started off fairly well, but delays slowly began to build on the Main Line after trains had to begin operating at reduced speeds through New Hyde Park due to a broke grade level crossing gate near the station. A car on the tracks near Gibson station also put a damper on Far Rockaway Branch service as the LIRR rounded off the PM Peak. There was also another few strange series of events that took place on the Main Line east of Ronkonkoma and went largely unnoticed Wednesday night, likely due to the few people who ride the trains out to Greenport. Nonetheless, train 256 (the 6:53 pm train from Ronkonkoma became delayed outside of Medford due to "police activity." [Newsday later reported](#) that service was halted after a woman's body was found hanging at Medford station, and that Suffolk County police were investigating the incident as a suicide. The train then returned to Ronkonkoma where the 29 passengers onboard (less than a 10% loading ratio!) were bussed to their final destinations. (Passengers waiting for the return train, train 253, was also accommodated by substitute bus service). However, this story didn't end there. For reasons not yet known, the Greenport scoot equipment ended up operating all the way east from Ronkonkoma to Greenport after the situation at Medford was resolved. The train turned in Greenport and headed back to Ronkonkoma around 11:30pm, and, from the wording of the alerts, the equipment derailed at some point before making it back to Ronkonkoma. A replacement set was

brought from Jamaica overnight, but it wasn't able to get to Ronkonkoma with enough time to represent the first pair of trains on Thursday morning (3200/201), so they were also cancelled, with this cited as the cause. The LIRR seemed to re-rail the scoot equipment (1 DE and 2 C3's) quickly enough, as the equipment had made it back to Ronkonkoma before train 200, the "Jury Duty Special," ventured east, and the troubled diesel set appeared to have limped back to Jamaica around lunchtime on Thursday.

While all this was going on out on the east end of Long Island, the commutes for the rest of the LIRR's commuters weren't going too smoothly Thursday morning either. Signal trouble around New York Penn Station resulted in the [AM Peak diversion plan](#) being put into place (sending a bunch of trains to alternate terminals, and cancelling even more in Jamaica). Service on the Main Line was further interrupted when the LIRR lost one of the two Main Line tracks between Carle Place due to vandalism at the Carle Place and Willis Avenue substations on the Main Line. As it turns out, 300 feet of copper wire had been stolen from the two substations, and the theft from the Willis Avenue substation ended up causing a small track fire that damaged some rail. MTA Police announced Friday that they had arrested Bernard Jenkins, a Hicksville man, for eight separate occasions of copper theft. MTA Police questioned Jenkins when he showed up for a court appearance in Mineola in connection with an earlier arrest for the same crime. According to Friday's [press release](#), the other incidents occurred at School Street in Westbury, two

incidents at the Carle Place substation, and at Roslyn Road in Mineola. Jenkins struck again at Roslyn Road two more times, as well as making another visit to the Carle Place substation. MTA Police said that most of Jenkins' vandalism had no impact on service, indicating that he knew how to remove the copper and get away without injuring himself. It is difficult to entirely secure the LIRR's right of way, considering it spans hundreds of miles across the entire island, but MTA Police say they have been stepping up their surveillance with some success.

The rest of the day before Halloween went pretty lethargically too—a sick customer in Jamaica and several scattered, minor police activity incidents delayed several trains by 6-10 minutes. No significant delays, but quite a few grumbling passengers, especially considering most were likely delayed earlier that morning.

The day of Halloween itself went much better for the LIRR—all but one train arrived on-time in the AM Peak, and while there were lots of people taking the LIRR into the city on Friday night, a couple of reverse-peak passenger extras made things go by without too much trouble. There weren't very many cases of police activity later that night either, so everyone got home without causing too much trouble.

So, the week of Halloween will be one the LIRR would likely want to forget pretty quickly—luckily, it only comes around once a year!

ANOTHER NEAR MISS IN THE “WILD WEST” OF CAPITAL CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

F train service was disrupted on Thursday afternoon when a gigantic 10-inch drill bit accidentally drilled its way through the top of a subway tunnel east of the 21st Street-Queensbridge station in Queens. The drill bit narrowly missed drilling through the roof of a passing F train that had a total of 800 people onboard. The drill bit did manage to strike the steel frame of the car and shattered a few glass windows. (A photo of the drill bit in the tunnel [is available online](#)). The incident occurred when a contractor, Griffin Dewatering New England Inc., working on the East Side Access project mistakenly drove the bit down into the tunnel. Griffin Dewatering, who was hired as a contractor to complete the work, was in the process of expanding a construction well when the incident occurred.

Thursday's incident is the latest in a series of hiccups for the MTA's nearly \$10 billion capital construction project. The project, which has been marred with delays, cost overruns, and other incidents that have caused disruptions to LIRR and New York City Transit service in the area. Back in April, MTA officials said they were looking into the cause of several sinkholes at construction sites in Queens—one of those sinkholes was nearly nine feet deep and was likely caused by workers not filling in a hole created when they removed a boulder while digging a hole for a utility pole in 2008.

East Side Access is a project that will benefit the LIRR and its riders significantly when it is completed—though we still appear to be quite a ways away from the light at the end of the tunnel.

MTA BOARD APPROVES WEEKEND WEST HEMPSTEAD BRANCH SERVICE RESTORATION

At the MTA's monthly board meeting in October, the MTA Board approved the restoration of weekend service on the LIRR's West Hempstead Branch, restoring a service that was cut just over four years ago in September 2010. During the 2010 service cuts, riders at Westwood, Malverne, Lakeview, Hempstead Gardens, and West Hempstead lost their weekend service due to low ridership.

The train times for the restored West Hempstead trains have already been loaded into the LIRR's Schedules & Fares finder on its website, and service is set to be officially restored beginning with the November timetable change in just a few weeks.

Unfortunately, the LIRR is restoring service on this branch operating on a nearly identical schedule to how the trains operated before the service was cut. The service is nothing more than bi-hourly shuttles making the 15-minute trip between Valley Stream and West Hempstead. Trains will connect with Far Rockaway trains at Valley Stream, and passengers wishing to travel to New York Penn Station will have to transfer a second time in Jamaica.

The lack of service on the West Hempstead Branch is likely one of the primary reasons why ridership is so low on the branch. Getting passengers to ride West Hempstead Branch trains is often difficult, as most will opt to drive to Lynbrook, Valley Stream, Hempstead, or Merillon Avenue where more frequent and direct service is offered. The transfer at Valley Stream kills time and drives potential passengers to their cars, and the long, bi-hourly headways make the West Hempstead Branch a difficult branch to make plans around.

Unfortunately, this service restoration, which will likely be welcomed by many members of the communities along this branch, represents a missed opportunity for the LIRR. Restoring the same old unimaginative schedule will likely get you the same, very low ridership the branch saw when the service was cut. There are zero notable obstacles to having direct, and more frequent, service to Jamaica, Atlantic Terminal, or Hunterspoint

Avenue, showing the LIRR isn't really inclined to explore potential ways to improve their services. The West Hempstead Branch could have been a great first place to start, but considering the restored schedule involves the same operating pattern as before (which involves the train sitting around idling for 45 minutes out of every hour), one wonders if the money being put towards this service might be better off spent elsewhere.

SEVERAL ESA READINESS PROJECTS MOVE FORWARD

The MTA awarded two contracts earlier this week to support two East Side Access readiness projects. Both awards will allow work to begin on the construction of a new pocket track along the Montauk Branch in Massapequa, and an extension of the existing Great Neck Pocket track on the Port Washington Branch.

Ansaldo-STS USA was awarded a \$1.855 million contract to design, build, and assist with the installation of a signal hut that will provide the necessary signal system to control the signal system for the interlocking to control the movement of trains into and out of the Massapequa Pocket Track. The pocket track will be installed just east of the Massapequa station and it will go in between the two existing Montauk Branch tracks in this area. Some work on the project has already been done, and this work will advance construction activity on this project further.

The MTA also awarded a \$24.9 million contract to Railroad Construction Company, Inc. to construct the Colonial Road Improvement Project. This project will involve extending the existing pocket track at Great Neck so it can accommodate a second, twelve-car train, as well as the replacement of the 115-year old Colonial Road Bridge which spans over the Port Washington Branch in this area.

These awards come as work on the first phase of the Ronkonkoma Branch double track project and the first phase of the Jamaica Capacity Improvement Project began this year. These ESA readiness projects will be an important factor that will allow the LIRR to run enough trains once East Side Access is open for business. Presently, capacity constraints at several locations systemwide could prevent the LIRR from utilizing East Side Access to its fullest extent on opening day.