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Year in Review: West Chester hopes for rail revival

by Lee Hudnell

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WEST CHESTER >> The borough committed itself in 2014 to support efforts to bring back commuter train service.

Efforts to revive railroad service to the borough have surfaced periodically since the last commuter train left in 1986.

At that time, the borough was still lurching along at its economic bottom, struggling to reinvent itself. The rail line wasn't successful either, drawing only handfuls of passengers for a rail line into Delaware County and Philadelphia.

Central Chester County, on the other hand, was booming. SEPTA, with the permission of Chester County officials, built a commuter train station in Exton, six miles north of West Chester, on the old Pennsylvania Rail Road Main Line. It was part of the regional mass transit agency's program to expand rail service past Paoli and into western Chester County. The Exton station has been successful, attracting commuters from that area.

After being largely unused for a dozen years, the rail line to West Chester was partially revived by the West Chester Railroad, a weekend tourist line that runs trains into the county south of the borough. It has restored the old rail line in working order and kept it from deteriorating. It uses the old freight yard in the south end of the borough to store their rehabilitated old rail cars and engines. Occasionally the line even runs trains further down the track to Elwyn, where SEPTA service currently terminates on the line before heading to Media and Center City Philadelphia.

Returning commuter service to the borough, however, was established in 2014 as a stated goal of borough council, which established a citizens committee to work on the issue.



Supporters managed to get the idea acknowledged in Chester County's long-range development plans – for after the year 2030 or so.

But transportation studies present a tepid picture of the situation. A Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission study several years ago said a restored service “conservatively” might generate 1,900 rides a day by the year 2035 on an electrified line from West Chester to Elwyn (where the commuter line currently ends) and then into Philadelphia.

This study notes that a West Chester line is the slow way into Philadelphia. The route is more round-about. The main line tracks are straight into the city and operate at higher speeds.

The borough is currently connected to 69th Street in Upper Darby by bus down West Chester Pike. From the terminal there, the Market Street elevated/subway line takes commuters into Center City. That's been a primary service to Philadelphia even before the rail line was discontinued.

All bus service to West Chester received a boost when a terminal was included in the Justice Center garage on West Market Street.

History may cheer rail supporters even if current conditions don't appear so bright.

When the first rail line out of Philadelphia was being planned in 1829, 30 organizers told West Chester supporters to forget about it. The cutting edge technology bypassed West Chester to the north at the current rail line to Harrisburg through Chester County.

West Chester boosters didn't give up. First they built a connection from the borough to the new “main line,” connecting first at Malvern and later west of Frazer. A couple decades later, the second 26-mile line to Philadelphia was built through Delaware County and Media and into Philadelphia.

That second line was the one that remained the connection to the big city, and the one boosters hope to revive in the future.

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