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Rail to West Chester added to long-range county plan

by Jeremy Gerrard

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West Chester officials hope scenes like this will return to the borough some day. (AP Photo/Nick Ut)

WEST WHITELAND – The Chester County Planning Commission is incorporating resident suggestions for improvements to its Public Transportation Plan that officials unveiled last week.

The plan examines the future of transportation by establishing three 'horizons' of where commission members want the county to be in 2020, 2030 and 2040.



The plan is targeted to be completed by the summer of this year. The next public meeting to discuss the plan is scheduled to be held at the Exton Library at 6 p.m. on May 14.

Upon completion, the county will begin the process of adopting the plan as an element of Landscapes 2, the new comprehensive plan for the county.

Short and long-term plans include expanding and improving existing rail facilities by incorporating more parking and better connecting routes through buses as well as creating new commuter service routes to better connect residents in the northern and southern portions of the county to existing services.

The new plan continues a focus on expanding rail lines to Coatesville and improvements that would stretch the line out to Atglen, while the 2040 horizon shows a commuter service rail extension to Pottstown.

Other improvements target user experience and system efficiency that include the use of mobile applications and improvements to bus stop locations and amenities.

Among those who attended the meeting were a number of West Chester Borough Council members, including council President Jordan Norley, who opened up public comment with a plea for the return of regional rail service to the borough.

'We are aware of the long standing conventional wisdom that West Chester will never again be serviced by rail,' Norley said. 'But in many cases conventional wisdom that has long existed should be reexamined.'

Norley highlighted how 'Landscapes, Chester County's county-wide plan adopted in the 1990s, sought to concentrate dense population growth in the urban centers of the county.

'The West Chester urban center is the most clearly defined of all the county's urban centers,' Norley said.

In February council voted to advertise an ordinance that would establish a Committee to Reestablish Rail Service to West Chester. The committee is proposed to be comprised of seven members to work with all agencies and interested organizations to achieve the goal.



Norley said borough officials support improvements at Exton and do not view a future service to the borough as bumping heads with other county rail projects.

'The other suburban county seats are linked to Philadelphia by rail,' Norley said. 'West Chester should be as well. That is a priority of our Borough Council.'

According to planning commission officials, regional rail service to West Chester was added to the 2040 horizon year as a result of the meeting.

Other residents at the meeting expressed enthusiasm for the proposed changes, but were critical that the plan was not aggressive enough and needed to better address the needs of seniors and people with special needs.

'We can do this, we can work together to get this done ... Bus routes in 2040? That's not exciting,' said one resident.

Planning Commission officials agreed to incorporate public opinion into their plan presentation and announced the creation of a citizen's advisory group for that purpose.

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