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Rail service for West Chester discussed at meeting

By Bill Rettew brettew@dailylocal.com
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More than 100 residents attended Thursday's meeting about possibly again connecting Philadelphia and West Chester by railroad, at Cheyney University.

BILL RETTEW JR. – DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA

THORNBURY >> Money changes everything.



Enough riders are expected to fill the seats, and the expense has been calculated, but there will be no train, as planned, running from West Chester Borough to 30th Street Station, until funding is secured.

Tom Hickey, of commuter railroad Virginia Railway Express, and formerly SEPTA, attended a Thursday night SEPTA presentation, at Cheyney University.

“There’s a romance to it, but there is always a business to it,” Hickey said. “Like any other business, SEPTA has to find the funds to operate it.”

Hickey said that just 109 daily riders commuted past Elwyn and into Philadelphia when the SEPTA railway from West Chester to Media portion was shut down in 1986. Public transportation commuters typically pick up half the cost, with subsidies financing the remainder, Hickey said.

The cost determined through the studies pegged the expense to build a one-track railway at \$334.6 million and for two tracks at \$570.6 million.

Although SEPTA considers the project viable, Liz Smith, director of strategic planning and partnerships for SEPTA, said the public transit agency will need to find a way to pick up the tab before the railroad becomes a reality.

The West Chester Railroad currently runs a tourist line along SEPTA-owned track and right of way.

Smith said there should be enough riders to support the work.

“Throughout our system, there is a resurgence in old boroughs and towns that grew up around railroad stations,” she said. “We’re seeing that there are areas where people want to move to and don’t want to be chained to a car.

“West Chester has a nice walking downtown area.”

SEPTA projected a completion date for 2040. Hickey said that when funding is secured, the line could be established within three years.

Work needed includes installation of new ties, reconstruction of bridges, electrification, and work on existing grade crossings and signals.



Projected costs include bridge rehabilitation and reconstruction at \$20 million for single-track and \$35 million for two tracks. Station platforms and parking might cost from \$51.6 million to \$66.6 million. Signals and communications would run \$19.1 million for single-track and \$21.7 for two tracks.

A \$56 million contingency fund was also considered.

Raymond Haws rode the train to West Chester when visiting the Warner Theater. He remembers scrambling to catch the train before the last one of the night left the station on Market Street at 10 p.m.

Haws wonders if enough riders will take the train.

"It might work," he said. "Who knows what transportation is going to be like in 25 to 30 years?" Haws said.

John Vilella is West Chester University's vice president for university affairs. He is excited that there will be a stop at the university.

"(The university favors) anything we can do to reduce traffic and make commuting easier for higher education," Vilella said.

Ken Hemphill, of Concord Township, said he happily anticipates a section of railway now under construction that would take riders from Wawa to 30th Street Station. Commuters now make most of that trip via rails.

"It would take a lot of traffic off West Chester Pike," Hemphill said. "You could work on a laptop while not getting stressed out about getting to work."

"You can do work on a train. You can't do that in a car."

"I would like to have this considered in depth," said resident Edward Cavey. "What is the ridership potential?"

David Walton, of Westtown, is a railroad enthusiast and would like to see a cost/benefit analysis.



"Light rail always costs more than projected and ridership is always less than projected," Walton said.

Former West Chester Mayor Jordan Norley supports the railroad.

"Some people will continue to think rail service to WC is impossible; some people will need to be hit by the train when it returns to believe it," Norley said. "Meanwhile, we'll keep on working and get it done.

"It's only a money game now, let's play. 'Rome wasn't built in a day.' Some things are bigger than us; WC will be here long after we're gone. You don't serve your community to reap the outcomes, the service is the reward itself."

Jo Ann Kelton is a member of the West Chester Borough ad hoc committee to restore rail service and said establishing service would create new ridership. She said SEPTA does not need to wait until all the funding is secured to start construction.

"One hundred and eleven people attended the open house last night, a cold January evening," Kelton said. "The total ridership in 1984 when the line was shut down was 109!

"I think we are on to something ..."

SEPTA expects the train ride from the borough to the city to take 50 minutes. Installation of only a single track might increase commuting times, making the more expensive option to build two tracks worth considering.

Smith said that upcoming steps to make the railroad a reality include additional planning, commissioning an environmental analysis and work with design and engineering.

The seven-member ad hoc advisory committee to bring back the railroad meets monthly, on the second Wednesday of the month at 7 p.m., at the relocated Borough Hall on Paoli Pike, in Room 2B at the Spellman Building. The public is always welcome to attend.

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