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'All Aboard' for a rail service to West Chester

Jordan Norley
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Last summer, in the face of an insurmountable obstacle, West Chester residents, business owners, and public officials worked together to create the Gay Street Open Air Marketplace.



The effort, lauded as a safe way to promote business and give some joy back to the people of West Chester, proved once again that our borough takes pride in facing challenges together and coming out stronger. The marketplace also displayed something we already knew: as our borough grows, quality of life needs grow with it.

Fellow residents have joked with me in the past about cars clogged on Gay Street, or parking garage occupancy. As mayor, it is my responsibility to look at these issues critically, and to work to create solutions. It's also my responsibility to understand our borough's rich history, and to learn from it.

The proposed Rail Service to West Chester meets all this, and more: it provides a historical solution to a long-standing problem, allows for future sustainable growth, and shows once again that West Chester prides itself in solving challenges. The Rail Service would provide, on top of all this, one compelling solution to the increasing dangers of climate change in our community and world.

Picture you and your family walking to Market Street, hopping on a train, and riding right into Philadelphia to walk the Historic Center City or go to an Eagles Game. Or a Monday morning, where commuters can catch a ride near their place of work, skipping the traffic. More than idyllic trips and commuting efficiency, the Rail Service will provide immediate well-paying jobs, further transportation equity, and create an environmentally-friendly route to travel quickly throughout the greater Philadelphia region.

West Chester's railroad is as historic as any in the Southeastern Pennsylvania region. However, as time went on, the railroad got less and less love, until it was abandoned in 1986, leading riders to divert to Exton. Since then, West Chester has seen rapid positive development, and this development necessitates increasing public transportation options.

People might look at our regional rail maps and assume that, with Exton being so close, a West Chester rail service is not necessary, and residents who need a train into Philly can "drive to Exton."

That solution is short-sighted. We will offer options that work for everyone, and our solutions must be equitable, so all residents can afford to travel where they need to. The Rail Service to West Chester would accomplish this. We are the home of Chester County's government, and we have a



massive commuter population, both in the workforce and at West Chester University. Thousands of borough residents and students could walk to stations on Niels and Market Streets, expediting travel immensely.

In 2014, my first order of business as President of the Borough Council was to champion the founding of the Committee to Re-establish Rail Service to West Chester. We sought to explore the feasibility of a railroad service in West Chester.

Our studies came back with glowing results: with a Rail Service to West Chester, we would see a massive pool of new riders, with 73 percent of those proposed to use the line being new riders. Likewise, 30% of riders would come from the borough, indicating that a West Chester rail service would drive more growth in the town itself. A later study developed by SEPTA affirmed the feasibility of this project, stating that a West Chester line is more than possible, and the cost-per-passenger is in-line with other rail lines in the Philadelphia region.

This project is ambitious. It requires all of us to be on board, and to work together to make this vision a reality. We are moving in the right direction. Just this week, the Committee held a meeting attended by dozens of residents, our County Commissioners, state legislators, DVRPC, and SEPTA officials. We share a common goal to get this done, and are exploring every option to progress our work and to be shovel-ready when the time is right.

If you would like to get involved, listen in on our planning, and share your voice, I invite you to join the Committee meetings, hosted every second Wednesday at 7pm. You can find these meetings through the West Chester borough webpage (west-chester.com).

We will also be sending out a petition of public support for the Restoration of Rail Service to West Chester in the near future. This project is already on track, and with your support and energy, we'll be full steam ahead.

Jordan Norley is West Chester's mayor.

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