



FACT SHEET: BOROUGH INVOLVEMENT IN THE WEST CHESTER RAIL LINE

West Chester Borough Council ■ Advisory Ad-Hoc Committee to Reestablish Rail Service to West Chester

It has been 35 years since SEPTA trains ran to West Chester and even the most optimistic assessment for their return places them a decade or more into the future. Meanwhile, the Borough of West Chester has taken positive steps to maintain the right-of-way in the short-term and to reestablish rail service to West Chester in the long term.

The Borough of West Chester predates the Age of the Railroad but, at the dawn of the age, the town fathers recognized the importance railroads would have on the Borough's economy. They chartered a railroad to connect themselves to the outside world starting in 1832, then chartered a second one the reached the Borough in 1858.

In the ensuing decades, the fortunes of the railroads ebbed and flowed under the control their private-sector owners with little or no governmental involvement. That changed on January 1, 1983, when West Chester's sole remaining railroad was acquired by the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA).

SEPTA suspended train service to West Chester on September 16, 1986, due to deteriorated track conditions. A decade later, the Borough was increasingly concerned over the condition of the unattended right-of-way and the threat it potentially posed to public safety. It saw abandoned rail lines in other communities

Abandoned Rail Line and Station in Bucks County



descend into overgrown eyesores and determined not to share their fate.

In 1996, the Borough leased 7.2 miles of the line from SEPTA in order to see to its immediate upkeep and ensure its preservation for future passenger rail service. It then sublet the line to the West Chester Railroad (WCRR), a private railroad affiliated with the West Chester Railroad Heritage Association (WCRHA), a non-profit 501(c)3 educational organization. WCRR maintains the line on the Borough's behalf without charge in return for permission to run tourist trains over the tracks.



The tourist trains embody WCRHA's educational mission to enact "living history" experiences that echo the golden age of railroads in Chester and Delaware Counties and foster an appreciation in the younger generations for the sounds and the soul of railroading. The trains also attach a steady flow of tourist traffic to Downtown West Chester, to the benefit of local restaurants and other businesses.

This public-private partnership has gone on for a quarter century.

Subsequent Borough involvement with the West Chester Rail Line continued to reinforce the same two initial goals: *to see to the upkeep of the right-of-way and to ensure its preservation.* Key milestones of the Borough's involvement include:

- In July 2008, the Borough renewed its lease with SEPTA and its sublease to WCRR.
- In March 2014, Borough Council created the *Advisory Ad- Hoc Committee to Reestablish Rail Service to West Chester* and charged it "to cause, as soon as possible, the



reestablishment of rail service to West Chester.”

- In September 2015, the Rail Advisory Committee published *The Potential of Rail Service to West Chester Borough*. It concluded that restoration of rail service was technically feasible and would be cost-effective in comparison with other regional projects. It acknowledged that no funding was identified for implementation, however, and that SEPTA’s priorities to restore its existing rail system to a state of good repair would take precedence over expansion projects.
- In December 2017, the West Chester Extension was added to *CONNECTIONS 2045*, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission Comprehensive Plan for Greater Philadelphia.
- In March 2018, SEPTA and PennDOT published *West Chester Line Restoration Feasibility Study*, which reached the same conclusions as the Rail Advisory Committee report and established a \$380 million capital cost estimate for the project.
- In November 2018, the West Chester Extension was added to *Landscapes 3*, the Chest County Comprehensive Plan.
- In October 2020, the West Chester Extension was added to PennDOT’s *Pennsylvania State Rail Plan 2020*.
- In 2021, at SEPTA’s request, the Borough initiated an update to a 2018 analysis, *SEPTA Drives the Economy of Pennsylvania*, which quantified the economic benefit of regional rail service on housing values and businesses. The update would be more focused on the West Chester Line corridor and is co-sponsored by Chester County.
- In July 2021, the Borough applied for a competitive grant under the USDOT *Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE)* program to fund an accelerated program of corrective maintenance by WCRR and WCRHA to

incrementally stabilize track conditions, enhance safety, and make the line easier and less costly to maintain.

- In July 2021, West Chester Borough received a US Senate appropriations earmark “to enable a shuttle connection to Philadelphia.”

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