



FACT SHEET:

WEST CHESTER RAILROAD STATE-OF-GOOD-REPAIR PROJECT

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

The *West Chester Railroad State-of-Good-Repair Project* is an accelerated corrective maintenance program proposed by the Committee to incrementally stabilize track conditions on an active, 9.4-mile railroad through a unique public-private partnership. In the end, the railroad will be less costly to maintain and more resilient against the forces of climate change, with enhanced safety and new opportunities for the movement of goods by train, all the while preserving the line for future opportunities to restore passenger rail service.

SEPTA suspended Route R3 train service to West Chester on September 16, 1986, due to deteriorated track conditions. A decade later, West Chester Borough, concerned over the condition of the unattended right-of-way and the potential threat it posed to public safety, determine to see to its upkeep and protect it for the future restoration of passenger rail service.

The Borough leased 7.2 miles of the rail line from SEPTA and concurrently sublet it 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 agreed to maintain the line on the Borough's behalf in return for permission to run tourist trains over the tracks, using WCRHA members for volunteer labor in accord with the Association's educational mission. This public-private partnership has gone on for a quarter century.

Maintenance of Way is a labor-intensive activity so the contributions of WCRHA volunteers is vital to making it work. Their efforts are made all the more difficult, however, by the depleted condition of the underlying physical plant that SEPTA inherited from Conrail after years of deferred maintenance and led to the 1986 termination of service. Despite the volunteers'

best efforts, track conditions continue to slowly deteriorate due to poor drainage, eroding earthworks, and substandard rail (the oldest and lightest rail in main line use anywhere on the SEPTA system). Their struggles have been exacerbated by storms of increasing frequency and ferocity attributed to climate change.

The worst part of the line is a 2.2-mile "gap" between Middletown and Glen Mills (the end of the Borough's leasehold), which is no longer passible. This has cut off WCRR and the Borough from SEPTA and the General Railroad System of Transportation.

WCRHA Volunteers Working on the Railroad.



Complete replacement of the line (as SEPTA is doing between Elwyn and Middletown) is the only permanent solution but is prohibitively expensive—upwards of \$184 million in PennDOT's estimation. It would also be at odds with the priority SEPTA assigns to first restore its existing system to a state-of good-repair.

The Borough of West Chester proposes a more moderate, less costly, and less capital-intensive approach that will immediately improve track conditions, focusing instead on reversing defects in the underlying physical plant lingering from the Conrail era.

The *West Chester Railroad State-of-Good-Repair Project* (WC SOGR) is fundamentally an



accelerated corrective maintenance project that will incrementally stabilize track conditions and restore vitally important drainage systems using the existing rails, resulting in a more resilient physical plant that will be easier and less costly to maintain.

The work program consists of four construction tasks to be accomplished under train traffic in a 24-month project duration:

1. Restore 7.2 miles of active tracks (West Chester-Glen Mills) to condition consistent with FRA Class 2;
2. Restore 2.2 miles of currently impassable track (Glen Mills-Middletown) to a condition consistent with FRA Class 2;
3. Enhance safety and resilience by upgrading the entire 9.4 miles of track to a condition consistent with FRA Class 3; and
4. Enhance safety and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) by restoring active station platforms to a state-of-good-repair with ADA enhancements.

Upgrading and maintaining track to a condition consistent with FRA Class 3 is proposed because:

- FRA Class 1 is the highest track condition the WCRHA volunteers can achieve on their own, given the underlying defects in existing track and drainage systems stemming from decades of neglect; and
- FRA Class 1 is also the lowest track condition that permits the transport of passengers or hazardous materials, leaving no margin for errors—a single defect can result in suspension in tourist trains operations until it can be corrected and reinspected.

Elevating track condition beyond FRA Class 1 provides resilience as a defect would trigger a slow order versus a suspension of passenger operations. It also enhances safety for passengers and crew by lessening jerk—thereby

reducing the likelihood of trips and falls aboard moving trains—and the risk of derailments.

As an accelerated corrective maintenance program for the existing track, WCSOGR can dispense with most of the administrative, engineering, and design “soft-costs” that add to the cost of a new rail line. It also simplifies environmental permitting.

Work would be divided between spot rail and tie replacements accomplished WCRRA through traditional means and methods using WCRHA volunteers, and heavier-duty activities accomplished through contractors and/or mechanized equipment, such as rebuilding slopes, restoring drainage systems, and line and surfacing track.

The contributions WCRHA volunteers make to the upkeep of the Borough's leasehold are easily overlooked but nonetheless significant. In 2020, the volunteers logged nearly 26,000 hours of labor. According to the US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, the 2020 Median Pay for railroad workers is \$30.87 per hour. Applying that rate to the WCRHA volunteers' contributions results in a monetized value of over \$803,000 annually.

The estimated Project cost is \$6,950,188. On July 12, 2021, the Borough applied for \$5,560,150 in federal funds under the USDOT *Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE)* program. If approved, the funds would be matched with \$1,390,038 in in-kind labor contributions from the WCRHA volunteers. Based on the 2020 experience, the volunteers' contributions would accrue to an amount equal to the match about 20 months after project start.