

# Paoli Transportation Center - More Delays

By GRETCHEN METZ  
Staff Writer

Rena Coyle drives to the Paoli train station several times a week from her home in Newtown, Delaware County, to take the Amtrak to New York City. She works near Penn Station in the Big Apple. Timewise, taking the train is about the same as driving, but dollarwise, it is half as expensive, she said.

"I love it," Coyle said of the train. "I was a die-hard driver. Now the whole family has hung up their keys. I'm a convert."

Coyle did her 2007 taxes on the train, and she does work and catches up on personal odds-and-ends. She travels with a cell phone, laptop computer and a Blackberry. She's wired, making the train her off-site office. While the train ride is a dream, the nightmare is the well-worn Paoli train station. With the daily commuter parking lot across busy North Valley Road, Coyle said, she has fallen rushing across the street and injured herself on the way to the station in the morning. The need for a new transportation center at the suburban hub of the R5 line is an ongoing problem looking for a solution.

Plans for a new Paoli Transportation Center, one with a new station, passenger amenities, office buildings, a bus station to serve transfer riders, a taxi stand and an on-site parking garage - all to be located in the nearby Paoli Rail Yard - started in 1992. The problems are in the numbers: two rail systems, two townships in two Congressional districts looking to develop one former Superfund site, the Paoli Rail Yard. And there are no shortages of descriptions from involved parties.

Hugh J. Murray Sr., township manager in Willistown, called the project a 17-year "fiasco." Mark Cassel at the Transportation Management Association of Chester County, said the talks were in a "sensitive stage." John P. DiBuonaventuro, a new Tredyffrin supervisor, refers to the situation as a "very delicate equation."

"Everyone agrees this is the No. 1 transportation project," said DiBuonaventuro, who attended a Feb. 26 meeting for the project. The stakeholders - the rail lines, citizens, townships and business community - want results and the developer has to make the economic equation work, DiBuonaventuro said. DiBuonaventuro said he is encouraged by the energy and willingness of the parties.

The rail yard, a former Superfund site, finished remediation in 2002. SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority), Amtrak, Conrail and American Premier Underwriters (successor to Pennsylvania Underwriters) had primary responsibility for the cleanup that cost \$10 million in state environmental and transportation funding.

## Busy station

While SEPTA and Amtrak share the rails along with some passengers and some stations, Amtrak owns the Paoli train station. At Paoli, some 80,936 people boarded Amtrak trains in 2006, a little more than an average of 220 a day. And 1,214 weekday commuters boarded SEPTA R5 trains headed for Philadelphia in 2007, up from 1,128 a decade before.

Despite the ridership numbers, when it comes to building a new transportation center at Paoli, SEPTA is just along for the ride.

"This is primarily an Amtrak project," said Felipe Suarez, SEPTA spokesman. Rob Powelson, president of the Chester County Chamber of Business and Industry, finds that a poor excuse. How many people use that station to ride SEPTA? Powelson asked. The R5 is the busiest line in the SEPTA's rail system.

"Chester County deserves a first-class transportation center," Powelson said. "I use that station. The parking, in an affluent area like that, is almost laughable." As for Amtrak, the Keystone line is its most lucrative.

"It is time for Amtrak to fish or cut bait," Powelson said. State Sen. Andrew Dinniman, D-19th, of West Whiteland, would also like to see Amtrak dig in. "The best way to move forward with this is to get Amtrak to the table and get some direction out of Amtrak," Dinniman said. "Get the governor and the secretary of transportation involved to get Amtrak to the table."

Amtrak is working on a new zoning plan with the townships, said Karina Romero, manager of media relations at Amtrak. "We are moving forward and had a very positive meeting (Feb. 26) to discuss zoning issues and how to proceed with the project," Romero said. Meetings continue.

Stephen A. Aichele, who started attending Paoli Transportation Center meetings as a citizens' representative in 1995 after he left the Tredyffrin Board of Supervisors, was at that meeting, too.

"There are a lot of moving parts," Aichele said of the discussions. The goal is to stop some of the parts from moving and get the parties on the same page, said Aichele, a real estate lawyer and chairman of Saul Ewing. For years nothing could be done until the rail yard was remediated. Now the parties are meeting in smaller numbers and Aichele believes the project is back on track. But "the facts need to get down on paper," Aichele said. "The parties need to engage in useful ways. The more facts on the table, the more useful the engagement."

To develop the transportation center, Amtrak brought in Westrum Development Co., a Philadelphia-based developer with a reputation for taking contaminated sites in affluent areas and turning them into upscale developments. Westrum is willing to put \$217.1 million into the project, according to Tim Stevenson of PennDOT, one of the parties involved in the meetings. (Westrum referred questions to the property owner, Amtrak.)

Bruce Looloian, Amtrak systems vice president, said the meeting gave everyone a better understanding of what needed to be done. The problem now is the zoning. Of the two townships, Willistown has the more restrictive zoning that is presenting a problem for the developer. Murray, Willistown's manager, said the building that was proposed for the project was 75 feet tall. In Willistown, which has 30 acres of the project, the zoning height limit is 35 feet. Ronald T. Bailey, executive director of the Chester County Planning Commission, is getting impatient.

"Amtrak owns the property and they are not going to put one penny into the project," leaving the developer on the hook, Bailey said. So for the developer, "it all hinges on making the project pay for itself. Willistown adopted new (more restrictive) zoning. Amtrak had a new demand and a year and a half later, there is still no agreement."

### **Failure to Communicate**

State Rep. Carole Rubley, R-157th, of Tredyffrin, would like to see both townships work with the developer and write a joint ordinance. Thus far, there has been a "total lack of communication," Rubley said. U.S. Rep. Jim Gerlach, R-6th, of West Pikeland, said there has been significant money appropriated through three funding cycles that would have helped with engineering and design of the transportation center. But without a final plan, there is nothing to fund, he said. "Hopefully this will shake loose shortly," Gerlach said, adding that if federal money is not used, the funding lapses and the money goes away. Because of delays, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission is now making unavailable \$1 million that was to be used to redesign roads in Paoli. The money, provided through PennDOT's Transportation Improvement Program, was supposed to fund engineering studies to determine how the roads around the transportation center should be altered, according to Mimi Gleason, Tredyffrin manager.

DVRPC officials last week said the money is being pulled because it appears unlikely the project will begin this year. Squaring off Paoli Pike at Route 30 has long been part of the transportation center plan. To accomplish that, Matthews Paoli Ford would have to be relocated. George Steinmetz bought the dealership six years ago, knowing the business would need to move.

Thus far, "no one has contacted us," Steinmetz said. "We're focused on our business." The dealership will worry about moving "when we have to cross that bridge," he said. Though the project has no shortage of parties pulling for it, Gary Smith, president and chief executive at the Chester County Economic Development Council, is not one of them. He thinks the time has passed for Paoli.

"We don't need it anymore," Smith said. "We don't need a major, major transportation intermodal center in Paoli." Paoli is as busy as it is going to get and it is handling it, he said. There should be plans to build that super station at either Downingtown or Thorndale, places that have the room to build, places with booming growth, places that will need their own transportation center in five or 10 years, Smith said.

"The cost to do it at Paoli would be astronomical," he added. Michael Boyer, manager of the office of long-range planning and congestion management at the DVRPC, does not like the sound off that. Paoli is the hub. To build the rail center in Downingtown or Coatesville would be to further sprawl. The key to a transportation center is putting it in an existing community, Boyer said.

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