

PRESS AND JOURNAL

New Train Station: Everyone Still 'On Board,' PennDOT Says

Written by Dan Miller

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Press And Journal Photo by Dan Miller - A pedestrian bridge will cross over West Main Street at approximately this point between privately-owned dormitories for Penn State Harrisburg students.

The long-anticipated new train station in Middletown could be open by early 2018 under an updated timetable that the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation presented to Middletown Borough Council's planning committee on Wednesday, June 17.

Besides the station, PennDOT would also build the proposed extension of Emaus Street and a pedestrian bridge over Route 230 that would connect Penn State Harrisburg to the new station, according to Jennie Granger, director of PennDOT's Bureau of Aviation.

She expects construction of the station to begin in early 2016. The work would take 12 to 18 months to complete. Granger uses the two-year time-frame to be on the safe side.

Granger also cautioned that the timetable is dependent upon the track work that must be done by Amtrak and Norfolk Southern.

"My wild card is Amtrak," Granger told the committee. "They know this project is coming. They have worked on our design reviews. They have been intimately involved in review meetings on the station and on track work agreements."

"They do not have extensive manpower and there are a lot of projects going on throughout the country. We have some current construction projects going on with them, and when the accident occurred they had to pull everyone to report to Philadelphia," Granger said, referring to the deadly derailment that occurred at Frankford Junction in Philadelphia on May 12. Eight people were killed and more than 200 were injured.

A number of changes have been made in the station design plan. PennDOT is in the process of acquiring more land for the train station site, which lies just west of the Westporte Centre shopping center on West Main Street.

PennDOT has abandoned – at least for now – plans to acquire the Grace and Mercy Church on Ann Street and a borough maintenance building that is located in the area, Granger said. The concern is that the process of relocating the church or the maintenance building – or both – would further delay the project.

The church leases ground from the Susquehanna Area Regional Airport Authority, which owns the property. The maintenance building is owned by the borough.

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"I did not want to delay the station project another year, another two years, another three years until we could work this out," Granger said.

Additional land is being acquired to accommodate space for a proposed bicycle/pedestrian shared use path, the extension of Emaus Street to the station, area for stormwater collection and extra parking.

In addition, a location basically at the midpoint of Ann and Lawrence streets has been settled on as the preferred site for the pedestrian bridge, in consultation with Penn State Harrisburg and the developer of the Nittany Village student housing.

"Everyone is really on board with it," Granger said, referring to the pedestrian bridge location. "This does not preclude additional structural development on the site, like a parking garage or whatever kind of vertical potential structures we might consider later."

The bridge would use decorative fencing as a way to funnel college students and other pedestrians instead of allowing them to walk across Route 230.

Pedestrians will be able to walk their bicycles through the bridge. The train station will have covered racks where bicycles can be locked all day and protected from the elements.

"We have strongly supported and welcomed this endeavor from its early stages and believe that the bridge will allow the Penn State Harrisburg community safe and convenient access to the new train station as well as the downtown business district," said Dr. Mukund Kulkarni, chancellor of Penn State Harrisburg.

The south side of Route 230 – the train station side – will have stairs and an elevator people can use to get to the pedestrian bridge, since the land slopes lower than on the north side.

Borough Councilor Robert Louer asked who would be in charge of maintaining the elevator and the pedestrian bridge itself. PennDOT will seek a partner with whom the agency can enter into a maintenance agreement, according to Granger. This could be just for the pedestrian bridge or it could be part of a broader agreement for the station itself.

PennDOT is "ultimately responsible" to maintain the pedestrian bridge and the train station, Granger said. However, "I'm going to work to find somebody else to do that," she said. "We're not dumping it on the township (Lower Swatara), we're not dumping it on the borough."

People will be able to use the station to access other modes of travel besides Amtrak.

Capital Area Transit is looking to "re-analyze their route to better optimize their pick-ups and drop-offs in Middletown" to take advantage of the new train station, Granger said. The plan would also accommodate use of the station by longer-haul bus carriers like Greyhound.

Details are being worked out for a shuttle that would run passengers back and forth between the station and nearby Harrisburg International Airport. There could also be a shuttle to pick up and drop off Penn State Harrisburg students.

The Emaus Street extension would be one of the last phases of construction of the station – but it is a definite "go," Granger said. "I would say end of 2017, early 2018," she said of extending Emaus Street from downtown to the station.

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"We need all that area of staging" to support the earlier construction phases, Granger said. "We don't want to put vehicles and pedestrians and bicyclists in the middle of a construction zone. It's not a safe dynamic."

PennDOT knows how important the Emaus Street extension is to the borough's plans for revitalizing downtown Middletown, Granger said.

"The access road into the station needs to be extended. That has been a consistent message over the years," she said. "As we have advanced the design, the message has gotten louder. The department has committed to funding, to identify the funding, to construct it. It will be pursued in advance as part of the overall project."

The pedestrian bridge was not included in the \$32 million that PennDOT originally budgeted for the train station project. As a result, the cost may increase, but the budget remains "pretty much on target," Granger said.

PennDOT may ultimately reconsider acquiring the borough maintenance building in light of comments Louer made during the meeting.

He told Granger that discussions are underway between the borough and developers toward building a new electric substation and public works facility that could be located in Woodland Hills. That would potentially solve the dilemma of where to move the maintenance building.

However, Louer said the borough does not have a timetable for the substation project, and much is yet to be worked out.

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