

Officials debate value of Mount Joy train station

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Mount Joy

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The state Transportation Department is in the midst of a nearly \$360 million effort to upgrade the Keystone rail line.



A conductor steps off an Amtrak train Tuesday at the stop in Mount Joy. (Blaine T. Shahan/Staff)

Much of the PennDOT spending is to upgrade and build passenger stations to encourage the growing ridership on the Amtrak commuter rail line. And most of that spending will bring the many nearly century-old stations into compliance with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act.

In Lancaster County, that includes \$17.5 million at the Lancaster station and \$8 million in Elizabethtown from state, federal and county funding.

In Mount Joy, PennDOT will pay the full amount of what is now expected to be a \$27.5 million project.

But Monday, county transportation officials were asking how the project has more than doubled in cost from earlier estimates and whether it is even needed at all.

"I'm willing to be the bad guy here and say maybe we don't need that station," said Kathy Wasong, a member of the county's Transportation Coordinating Committee, which oversees transportation spending in the county.

Wasong, a Lancaster Township supervisor, was one of several committee members who questioned the project when it was presented to them by Toby Fauver, the PennDOT deputy secretary who oversees the Keystone line.

The Elizabethtown station is only four miles away and is already handicapped accessible, she said.

Dan Zimmerman, a coordinating committee member and the Warwick Township manager, said that ridership at Mount Joy is one-tenth of ridership at the Lancaster station, which received comparatively little PennDOT support in its recent renovation by the county.

According to fiscal year 2012 figures, Mount Joy had 69,025 passengers compared to 559,364 in Lancaster.

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The nearly \$30 million being spent in Mount Joy could build a much-needed parking structure that would serve existing ridership in Lancaster, Wasong said.

Committee members complained they were being brought in at the end of a design process and being asked to approve unfamiliar plans.

Fauver responded that they just haven't been paying attention.

The plans have evolved over several years with input from Mount Joy officials and Amtrak.

Previously, the coordinating committee approved the initial work on the station, which included repaving a pair of nearby church parking lots being used as station parking during the week. It also included constructing pathways to the station and erecting steel canopies over the walkways.

The second, \$25.2 million phase would construct a pair of elevators to new platforms along the tracks 20 feet below Marietta Avenue. A station building also would be constructed on the span over the tracks.

A second set of elevators or a pedestrian ramp with switchbacks also will be constructed to provide a second means of access, Fauver said. The cost for either would be about \$1 million, he said.

Rick Gray, Lancaster city mayor, questioned the proposed site for the station, which he said was in "a gully," and asked how much of the cost was paying for ADA requirements.

Fauver said Mount Joy officials want the station in the center of town. And he said all of the cost can be traced to the law's extensive regulations to provide access to the handicapped.

"It's not as simple as just making sure somebody in a wheelchair can get to a train," he said.

James Cowhey, executive director of the Lancaster County Planning Commission, defended the station plan.

"This is a 50- to 75-year investment. All of these stations are important to the long-term economic growth of the county," said Cowhey.

Eventually, committee members voted whether to move the project forward. The motion died with a seven-seven tie.

County Commissioner Scott Martin, the committee chairman, said the vote was not against the station. Rather, it was a vote for more discussion on the design process.

Fauver said afterward he was "extremely disappointed" in the coordinating committee vote.

"I heard people say that it was not a vote against the station project, but I don't know what else you could call it," he said.

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Fauver said he was taken aback by the questions.

"To have the Mount Joy station that has been there for more than 100 years, to have it questioned whether it should exist or not is a concern," he said.

Yet, he said during the meeting, it is the committee's decision whether to advance the project by adding it to the county's Transportation Improvement Plan.

Unless it is added to the TIP by late June, PennDOT will be unable to secure federal railroad funding for the station in the upcoming fiscal year. That money would go to other areas in the state or to another state, Fauver said.

The committee is not scheduled to meet again until late June, but Martin said they will try to arrange a meeting in Mount Joy in May that will focus on the station project.

Scott Hershey, the borough manager, said he is looking forward to the opportunity to host the meeting and talk to the committee members.

"We're certainly concerned," Hershey said Tuesday.

"This station in Mount Joy is extremely valuable to us. We're very blessed to be one of the few municipalities to have a train station right in our downtown," he said, adding that plans for the borough's future are built around the station.

"We'll do whatever we need to do to keep the project rolling," he said.

source: LancasterOnline.com