

Mount Joy train station plan chugs ahead

Amid questions over doubling of project cost, advisory committee suggests extra \$12.5 million for upgrades

Intelligencer Journal
Lancaster New Era
Updated Jun 11, 2013 22:58
Mount Joy

Originally Published Jun 10, 2013 19:55
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A conductor steps off an Amtrak train at the stop in Mount Joy in this photo. (Blaine T. Shahan/Staff)

Plans for a \$27.5 million Mount Joy Amtrak station picked up steam Monday.

Members of Lancaster County's Transportation Technical Advisory Committee called for \$12.5 million to be added to the county's transportation improvement plan for upgrades to the station. These would add elevators and platforms to bring it into compliance with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act.

The committee reviews transportation plans and makes recommendations to the county's Transportation Coordinating Committee.

The review was initiated when Transportation Coordinating Committee members in late April questioned the near doubling in cost for the station and asked whether it was needed at all, especially with the upgraded Elizabethtown station just seven miles away.

Coordinating committee members are expected to vote at their June 24 meeting whether to place the increased funding in the county plan. The meeting will be held at noon in the Lancaster County Government Center, 150 N. Queen St.

Columbia Mayor Leo Lutz, chairman of the Transportation Technical Advisory Committee said that many TTAC members were not on the panel a decade ago when the station was first added to the funding plan and were unfamiliar with details about the project.

Dennis Groff, a Paradise Township supervisor and TTAC member, said he was not on the panel at that time. Groff said that if project planners had sought the higher amount in the beginning, it may never have been funded.

Mount Joy Borough Manager Scott Hershey attended to tell committee members how important the upgraded station is to the town.

"Our whole downtown plan has been built around this train station," Hershey said.

"If this station were closed, I don't know what we would be or what we would look like in the future," echoed Kim Brewer, of Main Street Mount Joy and a business owner in the borough.

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The recommendation that the funding be approved, which included two dissenting votes, followed a presentation by Jennie Granger, executive assistant to PennDOT Deputy Secretary Toby Fauver, who oversees PennDOT's involvement with Amtrak's Keystone rail line.

Granger said the project will be fully funded through the state's allocation of Federal Transit Administration funds for passenger rail. The station construction will not take funds from other transportation projects in Lancaster County, she said.

She reiterated that the station work is necessary to comply with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act. If the work is not done, it significantly increases the likelihood the station will be closed, she said.

She also said the station funds cannot be used for other projects in Lancaster County. If not used for the Mount Joy station, the federal allocation might be used for another train station in Pennsylvania, but more likely would be allocated to another state.

The station served 69,518 passengers in the last fiscal year, according to Amtrak. Ridership has increased 71 percent since 2006, making it one of the fastest-growing stations on the line.

"We expect ridership to double in 10 years and double again in another 10 years," Granger said.

The investment is part of "a long-term, big-picture vision for the Keystone Corridor," Granger said.

She said the \$350 million spent since 2005 on improvements to the corridor includes welding the rails to make the ride smoother and allow trains to travel faster. Before 2005, Amtrak trains in the county typically traveled 80 mph. Trains are now traveling 110 mph, she said.

A key to that work is integrating stations into the communities they serve, she said.

She pointed to Mount Joy, where, instead of building a new parking structure, two nearby church parking lots were repaved and covered, and lighted walkways were added for Amtrak riders.

The project's second phase includes constructing an additional 130 parking spaces, a walkway over the tracks and a pair of elevators to reach the platforms 20 feet below.

A secondary means of exiting the trackside platform by wheelchair is being negotiated with Amtrak. That may be a series of switch-back ramps or another set of elevators.

Granger sought to ease concerns of the local officials and Mount Joy residents by saying that PennDOT will be responsible for the cost of ongoing maintenance of the station. That would include snow removal, cleaning, trash removal and elevator service, she said.

That was one of the concerns of Wendy Sweigart, a Market Street resident whose home abuts the Amtrak property. She said after the meeting that Granger had answered most of her questions, but she said there should have been better communication about the project throughout the process.

Her husband, Tad Anderson, asked Granger why an exemption was not being pursued to the Americans with Disabilities Act requirement that a high-level platform be built at the station.

The exemption is limited to stations where freight trains use the same tracks, Granger said. Although Norfolk Southern trains do go through Mount Joy, the wide loads that might strike the platforms can be directed on another route. Because the alternative route exists, Mount Joy doesn't qualify for the exemption, Granger said.

Anderson and Sweigart said they want to see that in writing from federal railroad officials. Similarly, they

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said they would like to see documentation the station funding will likely go away if not used at Mount Joy, and PennDOT's assurance that it is responsible for station maintenance.

"I was for the project 100 percent until I saw a \$28 million price tag and three years of night work," Anderson said.

source: LancasterOnline.com