

Mount Joy train station gets OK for funds to go ahead with construction

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Mount Joy

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In this file photo, a conductor steps off the train at the station in Mount Joy. (Blaine Shahan)

After questioning by local transportation officials, plans for a \$27.5 million Mount Joy train station are back on track after a vote Monday.

County Transportation Coordinating Committee members approved adding the \$12.5 million needed for the station to the county's transportation spending plan.

Plans call for building a covered walkway along Market Street over the Amtrak line and elevators on each side of the tracks, which will reach new covered platforms along the rails 20 feet below.

The improvements will bring the station into compliance with federal Americans with Disabilities Act requirements and further plans to increase train speeds on Amtrak's Keystone corridor.

Construction work is slated to begin next spring and it will take as long as three years to complete, said PennDOT's Jennie Granger.

Monday's 20-4 vote came after nearly two hours of discussion, with opponents voicing concern over the cost of the project and supporters complaining PennDOT had not kept them in the loop.

The issue arose two months ago, when PennDOT officials sought the additional funding. Committee members, who represent county, state and local governments, balked at the sharp increase from preliminary cost estimates approved for funding in 2009.

"I do think the people of Mount Joy deserve a better train station — what they have there is a problem, an absolute problem — but when the price doubled, it caused us to step back and take a look at it," said Kathy Wasong, a Lancaster Township supervisor and committee member.

Wasong, who voted against the measure, cited the \$21 million construction cost of a new school in her township. The new 100,000-square-foot Elizabeth Martin Elementary School will have plumbing, walls and other amenities that won't be seen in the "two platforms, two elevators and two sets of stairs" of the new station, she said.

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As costly as it sounds, Granger tried to put the spending in perspective. PennDOT is spending \$200 million to upgrade a dozen passenger rail stations between Harrisburg and Philadelphia.

"Twenty-seven-point-five million is nothing to sneeze at, but I assure you, it is within our typical station cost range," Granger said.

Ridership at the Mount Joy station has increased nearly 72 percent since 2006, from 40,467 to 69,518 passengers per year. PennDOT is expecting ridership on the Keystone line to double in the next 10 years and double again in the 10 years after that, she said.

And, she assured them, Amtrak would be responsible for repairs and maintenance, such as snow and trash removal, at the new station.

Previously, PennDOT officials said that if the funding increase was not approved by county officials, the federal funding waiting to be spent on the station will go elsewhere. They also maintained the station might be closed if Amtrak cannot show it is working to meet federal requirements for handicapped access.

Granger was less definitive Monday. She presented a letter from Amtrak stating Mount Joy was at greater risk for closure if the project does not move forward. The letter also said funding would be returned to federal rail officials, and Pennsylvania would again be forced to compete for it.

Scott Hershey, Mount Joy borough manager, and Kim Brewer, head of Main Street Mount Joy, also reiterated that the improved station is integral to the town's development plans.

"This will be a tremendous blow to Mount Joy if we don't get approval," Hershey said before the vote.

Columbia Mayor Leo Lutz, who voted to approve the funding, said the assurances may not have been necessary if committee members hadn't felt blindsided by the cost increase.

"What frustrates you is when it's dumped on you without any prior knowledge," Lutz said of the changes.

Lancaster Mayor Rick Gray said that he believes Mount Joy suffered because of the Lancaster Amtrak renovation project. When that \$17.5 million station renovation was almost completed, transportation committee members learned the peeling paint and crumbling plaster inside the station was not slated to be repaired.

"We felt, in a certain way, that we had been hoodwinked," Gray said, prompting increased scrutiny of the Mount Joy project.

James Reichenbach, a committee member and Lancaster City Council member, said that as messy as the process was, "this is exactly how it's supposed to work."

He said there should always be questions raised about major projects.

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Granger agreed that it will be a learning experience on both sides.

"This is good not only for this project, but for all 12 stations systemwide," she said.

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