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Officials tout Keystone rail upgrades

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The state Department of Transportation's multi-million dollar investment in the Keystone rail corridor between Harrisburg and Philadelphia is spurring ridership growth and economic development, transportation officials said today.

A \$145.5 million track rebuilding project has increased trains' top speed from 90 to 110 miles per hour and cut Harrisburg-Philadelphia travel time by 15 minutes, Toby Fauver told the audience at the Lancaster Chamber of Commerce and Industry's rail travel briefing this morning. Fauver is PennDOT's deputy secretary for local and area transportation.

The planned elimination of three road crossings will shave off several minutes more, he said.

Accompanying the rail improvements is an ambitious slate of station renovations. Fauver ran through a list ranging from the relocation of Middletown's train station to signage upgrades in Philadelphia's 30th Street Station. Some projects, such as the Elizabethtown station, are complete; others are in process or still in the planning stages.

Fauver said he has focused on "budget-first planning" — figuring out how much money is available, then keeping renovation plans within that constraint — rather than designing ambitious plans and then trying to find funding.

Local leaders participate in the planning process, and projects typically incorporate revitalization of nearby neighborhoods and business districts, he said.

"This is a 100-year investment," Lancaster County Planning Commission Executive Director James Cowhey said afterward.

Annual train ridership has seen steady increases of growth, reaching a modern high of 1.3 million trips in 2010-11, Fauver said.

The station upgrades are improving travelers' experiences and making train travel more appealing, he said. Keeping travel time and costs competitive with automobiles will ensure train travel is appealing to businesspeople and tourists, he said.

Because businesspeople can work en route, "the train makes business travel much more effective," Fauver noted in comments to reporters after his presentation.

Increased revenue has allowed PennDOT to reduce its Keystone funding subsidy for the first time, from \$9.3 million in the last fiscal year to \$8.8 million this year, he said.

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Nevertheless, funding is always a concern. The federal government is phasing out direct subsidies for rail lines less than 500 miles long, and PennDOT will have to pick up the slack in full starting in 2013-14, Fauver said. That will push PennDOT's Keystone subsidy up to \$12.4 million, he said.

Indirect federal funding underwrites about 80 percent of PennDOT's rail funding, and PennDOT will be able to shift funds to cover the higher Keystone subsidy, Fauver said.

The Pennsylvania line, which runs from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh, is covered by a different set of funding restrictions that bar some of the funding shifts allowed for the Keystone. Its switch to a full subsidy will be a little more difficult, he said.

The Pennsylvania line will need \$5.27 million in 2013-14 subsidies, he said.

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