

As train station project nears end, riders, officials offer assessments

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Improvements to the Lancaster Amtrak station are nearly complete. (Blaine Shahan/Staff)

"It looks nice," Patrick Richards, a 51-year-old engineer from Seattle, said of the Lancaster Amtrak station as he waited for his train Saturday in the station's newly refurbished main waiting room.

The fact that Lancaster has a station, however, is what's most important to Richards.

He's thinking of moving here.

"It's a big factor if I can commute to Philadelphia and don't have to drive,"

he said.

Bess Croyle traveled to Lancaster with her husband, her son and her daughter, their spouses and her four grandchildren, for what Croyle called "a Christmas adventure."

They came to Lancaster County via Amtrak for a show at Sight & Sound Theatre and to visit the National Toy Train Museum.

"It's a nice station," Croyle said Saturday as her party of 10 waited for a train back to Pittsburgh.

Croyle, Richards and others like them underscore some of the reasons local leaders have taken strong interest in Amtrak's nearly complete \$3.5 million "Capstone" project.

"For so many people, the train station is our front door," Tom Baldrige, president of Lancaster Chamber of Commerce & Industry, said last week.

"We want to make sure we're putting out the welcome mat, and the train station is one way to do that," he said.

The upgrades

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The Capstone project, begun in 2012, includes:

- repair of the plaster and fresh coats of paint on the walls and ceiling of the main waiting room;
- restoration of the station's historic clocks and hanging light fixtures;
- installation of heating and air conditioning in the concourse to the tracks;
- repair and refinishing of 14 historic wooden benches in the main concourse and the track concourse; and
- painting of the main entrance and foyer area in historically accurate colors.

Yet to be completed are fine-tuning the heating and air conditioning in the concourse to the tracks and painting of parts of the walls and ceilings in the same area.

Those fixes should be completed soon, Amtrak spokesman Craig Schulz said last week.

Separate from the Capstone project, Amtrak is actively working to secure funding to make the restrooms accessible to people with disabilities, Schulz said.

Lancaster Mayor Rick Gray and other officials who pressed for faster action over the years expressed a combination of enthusiasm at nearing the finish line and frustration with delays that plagued the 14-year, \$17.7 million renovation of the station's exterior and interior.

"It's taken so long to do that you forget what the hell it looked like before they started," Gray said Friday.

Still, he said, "it's certainly better than it was, that's for sure."

Baldrige said there were times when he wasn't sure the station would ever get to where it is, but he, too, is glad it's almost done.

"It's a great project, and hopefully it'll serve us well for years to come," he said.

A long, bumpy ride

Discussion of renovating the station, built in 1929, started in 1999.

Struggles to put a funding package together delayed work until the summer of 2009.

During that 10-year gap, Amtrak deferred maintenance on the building, leading to a leaky roof and deteriorating paint and plaster in the interior.

Then, as the original \$14.2 million project neared completion in the fall of 2011, local officials expressed shock that it did not include interior fixes.

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Amtrak soon agreed to pay for and see through the Capstone project, which kicked off in 2012.

In January 2012, local officials formed the Lancaster Train Station Advisory Committee to keep an eye on the progress.

Pluses, minuses

So, now that it's done, are local leaders satisfied?

Terry Kauffman, who as chairman of the Lancaster County Transportation Authority oversaw the 2009-11 upgrades of the station's roof, electrical system, plumbing and other "backbone" infrastructure, is happy with the work that's been done.

"Certainly, it looks like a finished product that we can all be proud of," Kauffman said Sunday.

Bob Shoemaker, president and CEO of the Lancaster City Alliance and a member of the local advisory committee, is happy with the upgrades but looks forward to deck parking, which he believes could entice restaurants and retailers to the station.

Baldrige calls the restrooms an "eyesore" that need work.

And Gray, remembering the dreams — depicted in a 2009 artist's rendering — of having restaurants and retailers in the station, expressed less than full satisfaction with the project.

"It's been a disappointment," he said, "what we had to go through to get a place that should have been a showplace to a level that is acceptable."

Still, Gray said he's glad the project is almost finished, noting the station's importance in keeping the city connected to the rest of the East Coast.

Baldrige was positive overall, saying the interior renovation works with the image Lancaster is developing as a historic city with 21st century amenities.

"It's clean, it's fresh," he said. "It celebrates our history, but also it's clear that it's been modernized and improved."

Shoemaker agreed.

He noted two other similar approaches: keeping the historic Watt & Shand facade in place as part of the Lancaster County Convention Center/Lancaster Marriott, and cosmetic touches planned at the under-construction new Lititz Pike bridge.

"With the new bridge, the artwork and landscaping," Shoemaker said, "you can see how this will wrap together very nicely."

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When work begins anew on the bridge, the station's eastern exit along McGovern Avenue will close again after being opened for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Pennsylvania Department of Transportation spokesman Greg Penny said it could close as soon as Jan. 6. It should reopen permanently when the new bridge is open to traffic for the next phase of that project, sometime from April to June, depending on the weather, he said.

Beyond being frustrated, Gray said the time the project took worries him looking forward.

"It raises questions as to whether what has been done will be maintained and who will pay for it," he said.

A combination of local, state and federal dollars has been invested in the station project.

Kauffman said he's going to keep an eye on how the station is maintained, and Amtrak will hear from him if it doesn't protect taxpayers' investment.

"Amtrak has a responsibility," he said.

source: LancasterOnline.com