

PennDOT hosts train station meeting in Coatesville

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COATESVILLE -- More than two dozen residents turned out Thursday night to ask questions or express concerns about location of a new railroad station in the city.

Representatives of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, City Council and Michael Baker Engineering Inc. explained the proposal to move the station to between Third and Fourth avenues.

For the past year, PennDOT has partnered with the City of Coatesville and the Chester County Planning Commission to relocate the Coatesville train station to a new location that complies with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act. If built, officials hope to complete the project by 2015.

Currently, the station cannot meet these requirements because the train tracks curve in front of the existing station. Handicap-accessible platforms require a straight length of track.

The proposal moves the station a few hundred yards to the east. The new station will also include elevators so that everybody will be able to access the trains.

PennDOT said it would fund the project, as long as there was a revitalization of the surrounding area. Noting positive feedback from retailers, the planners hope the \$16 million will benefit train commuters and that it will be a step toward attracting more commerce. Overall, it is expected that the total cost of the project will be \$18 million to \$19 million.

"This project will benefit the area at large, which is why PennDOT is going to commit this kind of money in Coatesville," said Don Thompson who was representing PennDOT and Chester County on Thursday. "It is one of the single largest steps that can be taken to revitalize an area."

But there has been criticism. Coatesville resident Patsy Ray spoke for neighbors who would have to sell their homes to the city so the buildings can be demolished to make way for the project. The area on Fleetwood Street includes about 20 homes and 12 to 14 of those residences are occupied. Ray said she is afraid those homeowners will not receive the market value on their homes and said they deserve to be treated fairly.

"What about the people living there who have been neighbors for years? Are you going to put them somewhere so that they can continue being near each other? First that street was devastated by the arson fires. Now all of a sudden you need a new train station so you kick them out?" she asked.

"We have to include that redevelopment process. That means that there are people that are going to have to move, and that is not a pleasant thing," said Thompson. "We will be working with the county commissioners, who are committed to making that process as easy as possible.



Staff photo by By Andrea Stephaich. Representatives of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, City Council and Michael Baker Engineering Inc. explain a proposal to move the train station to a new location.

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"The process is prescribed by law in terms of buying homes. Appraisals have not been gained, yet they will happen after tonight. There are some legal steps that have to occur. Everything will be open, and we will explain everything to those of you who own properties."

Andy Batson of Baker Engineers added: "The way its set up, it's not physically possible to renovate the existing station. So basically it comes down to the choice of moving it down a little bit and making it a little better so you can have more people riding it, or eventually it may not be able to operate at all and you lose that access to rail as a result of not being compliant with ADA. And that's a requirement that the entire country has to follow, not Pennsylvania or just this area specifically."

Residents have about a year to find new homes.

The project is divided into four sections:

- the train station and associated parking;
- renovation of old train station building;
- the Third Avenue streetscapes; and
- the redevelopment on Fleetwood Street.

The old train station building may potentially turn into something such as a coffee shop or a community center.

Other concerns include maintenance, appearance and environmental impact. While the first two have not yet been settled, the latter has already been determined. After many studies, the project will create no significant environmental impact.

Because the money funding the project comes from the Federal Transit Administration, officials had to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act by doing an investigation on impacts on the social environment, cultural resources, historical buildings, archeological sites and hazardous waste potential. The environmental assessment document can be found on the agency's website or in City Hall.

"People don't feel safe parking their cars at the Coatesville train station, so instead they drive to Parkesburg, Thorndale or Exton. The new station benefits those areas as well since there will now be more parking available," said Thompson.

Exhaustive studies were done and consultants evaluated the commercial and industrial uses in the area as well as the potential for growth. The planners concluded there is potential for growth in Coatesville. A mass transit system has proven effective at developing an area, and success stories including Mount Joy and Elizabethtown.

For more information on the project online, visit <http://www.planthekeystone.com>. On Monday, authority Solicitor Vincent Mancini said the negotiations are still moving forward, but some language in the contract still needed to be cleaned up.

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