

SEPTA takes lead in building new Ardmore Train Station

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In the past few months, Lower Merion's long-held hopes for partnership in redevelopment that would catalyze revitalization in downtown Ardmore have seemed to take blow after blow.

First, \$12 million in state grant funds for Dranoff Properties' proposed upscale apartment project on the township's Cricket Avenue parking lot was suddenly withdrawn in December.

Then, earlier this month, despite urgings that an approved plan might boost efforts to recapture the money, the Lower Merion Planning Commission tabled land development review, saying it wasn't ready.

It's about time, one might say, for some good news.

That good news may have come in recent weeks. And, in a twist, it comes from a part of the so-called Ardmore Transit Center project that had seemed, well, sidetracked in recent planning.

That is the Ardmore Train Station itself.

In an interview this week, Board of Commissioners President Liz Rogan confirmed news she had recently shared with board colleagues but had not yet publicly announced.

Rogan said that in a March 6 meeting with SEPTA representatives, the transit agency presented a new concept for train station improvements that includes a full-fledged new station building to replace the bunker-like structure that has stood on Station Avenue since the late 1950s. The original Victorian-era station building, which stood on the north side of the tracks, was demolished.

What's more, Rogan said SEPTA is proposing to step up and take a central role in station improvements and, potentially, construction of a new commuter and public parking garage there.

"It is great news," Rogan said.

Facing a large and seemingly intractable funding gap, the township began looking three years ago at shifting focus on the project that was launched in late 2004 with an initial federal grant of \$5.8 million. In that scenario, construction of a new train station would be deferred, while development of a mixed-use project in partnership with Dranoff Properties would be pursued. Later, the location of the mixed-use component was physically shifted a block or two away, to the Cricket Avenue lot.

Initially, SEPTA had pledged \$10 million toward a transit center/parking garage project, but had to pull that offer back when it faced severe capital budget constraints, said the agency's CFO Rich Burnfield in a phone interview Wednesday. More recently, working with PennDOT, SEPTA had again become a partner in plans for a first phase of train station improvements focused on making facilities handicapped compliant.



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This Phase 1 was to include improvements such as new high-level platforms, ramps and improvements to the existing tunnel connecting the inbound and outbound platforms, and the installation of foundation pilings for the parking garage. A kiosk for ticketing and canopies to shelter train passengers would be built, but a full station – possibly to be incorporated within the parking garage -- would be deferred until Phase 2.

With the Pennsylvania legislature's passage of a transportation bill last November, making additional funds available for many types of transportation projects statewide in 2015, Burnfield said the parties engaged in the Ardmore project "could take a second look." With that, he said, the recommendation presented this month includes a full station building.

Burnfield said while the Ardmore building is yet to be designed, SEPTA was able to show Rogan and other township representatives some examples of what it has in mind. The model for the one-story structures can be seen in stations built at Fort Washington, North Wales, Ambler and, most recently, Primos in Delaware County, over the past five or 10 years.

"It is a fairly standard design, but we do tailor it in architectural treatment to fit in with the local landscape," he said, explaining that different finishes such as brick or stone might be considered.

Another important component of what is now contemplated in Phase 1, Rogan said, is that funding in the \$20 million project would include full design of the parking garage. Earlier, Phase 1 would have funded design of the garage to the 60-percent design stage.

In addition, to expedite the project, SEPTA would take on day-to-day management of the Phase 1 project.

While Burnfield said the sense from township representatives was that this new approach is "a very positive development for the project," Rogan said there is another major change.

For the past three years running, Lower Merion Township has applied for funding for the transit center project through the U.S. Department of Transportation's TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) program. Three years running, it has not been selected in the highly competitive national program.

For the 2014 TIGER VI round of grants, when \$600 million is being made available for transportation projects nationwide, SEPTA has proposed to lead the way, serving as the primary applicant, with support from other partners including PennDOT, Amtrak, and – it is proposed – Lower Merion Township and Montgomery County as co-applicants.

Rogan said what is significant in this approach is that SEPTA has been successful in being awarded TIGER funding twice in recent years, including grants for the Dilworth Plaza improvements in Center City. The funding would be targeted for construction of the Ardmore parking garage in Phase 2.

With the transit agency taking the lead role, Rogan suggested, "It adds that much more strength" to Ardmore's application.

Even more important – and this is where finding funding for the garage has remained elusive – SEPTA has said it would take on responsibility for securing the 50-percent match of other funds required by the TIGER program.

The application deadline for TIGER VI is April 28. As in past years, Rogan said if Lower Merion Township wants to join in as co-applicant, the board of commissioners must adopt a resolution to that effect by late next month. She said it is her hope that SEPTA representatives will be available to take part in a public meeting at which that action would take place and show concepts for the Ardmore station building at that time.

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For Phase 1, Burnfield and SEPTA Assistant General Manager of Engineering, Maintenance and Construction Robert Lund said this week that a tentative schedule calls for station design to continue into the summer and fall of 2014, with final construction drawings to be complete by year's end. Bidding for construction and a notice to proceed would then come in the first half of 2015. Lund said construction could start by the end of 2015.

The actual construction period could be two to three years, Burnfield said, depending in part on operations of Amtrak, which owns the rail line and the land on which the Ardmore station sits.

Another impact to keep in mind: During construction, the existing SEPTA commuter parking lot at the station will be out of service for some period of time. That is one reason Lund said Phase 1 includes drilling of piles to serve as foundation for the future parking garage. These are circular holes that will be filled with concrete, he explained.

"When you go in to build the platforms and [associated] stormwater controls, you will have significant disturbance of the area," Lund said. "It made sense to do all [of the work] at the same time so you don't have to go back and redisturb" the area. There are cost savings in that approach, since equipment will already be on site, and, "It reduces the impact on train operations," he added.

Rogan said as SEPTA moves ahead on the project, there will be opportunity for public review as it moves through the land development process. Burnfield also said SEPTA would plan a public outreach process, including presentation, as design proceeds, of an alternate parking plan for commuter parking during construction.

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