

PHOENIXVILLE RAIL SERVICE? LOCALIZED FINANCE MODELS AND A CHANGING PARADIGM



DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT & CHANGE

By Barry Cassidy

We have passed my first initiative challenge in attempting to bring train service to Phoenixville. On September 11, 2018 Borough Council approved without comment or question that we should proceed with the investigation to determine if we are able to create passenger rail service to Phoenixville.

It could be interpreted that we keep getting approval from ourselves, but the process is sort of stacked against localized efforts. There is a process for negotiating change in the status quo. It is not easy. There must be an official government action in order to effectuate change in this particular process. The process is not responsive to individuals or groups of citizens seeking to implement train service.

I had learned this lesson a few years ago when we wanted to have service to Paoli from Phoenixville. I was unable to get a grant for an alternative analysis and our effort failed. This time, we did it a little different and secured local money to fund the local initiative, and hired a rail road engineer to create our "operational plan".

The first step was to seek permission to create an operational plan to enable the existing rail line, in this case Norfolk Southern, to see if the project fits their guidelines. We asked for permission to explore the opportunity and if it made any sense to follow-up and find out for ourselves if it is possible.

What we found was that it is doable. The next phase is the stakeholder contact and the outreach. We received permission from the borough to move forward and contact relevant agencies in their name. We scheduled a meeting with Norfolk Southern for the 21st of September and we will get input from them as to the reasonability of our request. They have their list of criteria, which we believe that we met, after reviewing the freight schedules and matching them to a SEPTA schedule.

That meeting will offer us guidance and indicate if our mission will be successful. Are we looking for a hard yes and a commitment to a specific schedule? Not really. What we will be seeking to obtain is a willingness on their part to work with us in development of the passenger line. I believe that we a decent shot to have them work with us.

Remember that the two efforts to do this previously revolved around unsuccessful attempts to secure dollars from the federal government and tolling on Route 422. Neither alternative presented really impacted Phoenixville in the way that our proposal impacts the area. Our funding plan is more locally based, and utilizing efforts for value capture that were not addressed in the previous efforts.

To date we have completed our operational study and a couple of meetings to get a committee up and running. We have held three public meetings, and because we are a grass-roots organization and effort, we will hold many more. We need this input to the plan in order to make the effort successful in the long term. Something kind of weird happened at our second public meeting. WHYY showed up and did a story on our effort. I thought that it was out of the ordinary that on a second meeting like that, public radio would show up.

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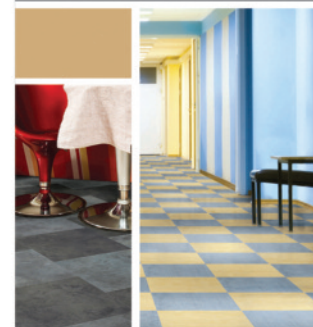
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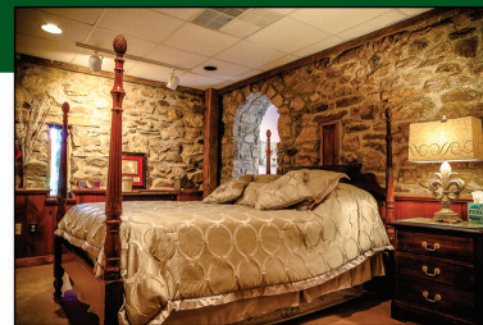
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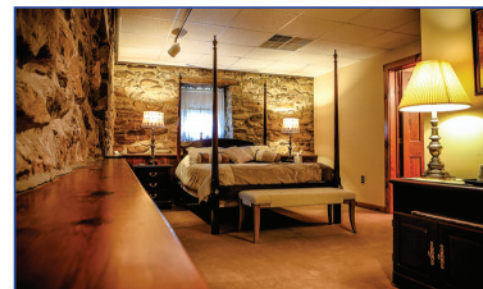
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DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT & CHANGE

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I was not surprised however when we received a somewhat negative article and it was picked up and published by PlanPhilly.

I thought the comments on the article were interesting because we had not released the plan yet. We did not release it until four days later because of spelling errors and the appendix could only be viewed as a pdf and we needed to make those technical and grammatic adjustments. One comment that struck me was: "It's one of our most active freight lines in the region, and that's something that every study has kind of come up against and never quite found a way to resolve".

But the long and the short of it was, our efforts were labeled a "long shot." I spoke later with some gamblers I knew to get the odds, and they were loath to provide betting odds. I needed a little closure to really interpret the article. Two of them said a long shot is a hundred to one and a couple of them were in at twenty to one.

I wondered what the odds were when the proposal was to toll 422 to fund the rail? They must have been much closer two or three to one for that project. They also faced the never quite found a way to resolve question and did not seem to

matter to anyone. Then I asked myself why are they spending millions and millions of dollars on a study to do what we want to do, and do not have confidence that the issue can be resolved?

All that being said, what difference does it make? We will keep on our schedule and attempt to secure the necessary approvals, and continue to seek input and have people ask the hard questions in one of the numerous public meetings we will hold as we continue to build our grass roots support. But the one issue I want to address at my September 21st meeting is the never quite found a way to resolve issue.

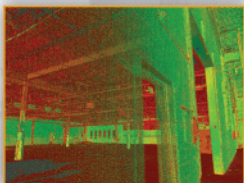
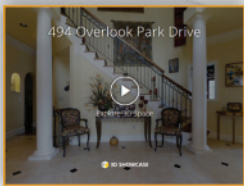
I do believe that the project will happen. I know a lot of smart people have tried to do this project and failed. Many of those people are helping us behind the scenes because they want to see it happen. So, can a group of lawyers, engineers, railroad enthusiasts, and business people do what others have tried to do and succeed? Don't know for sure, but if they do it could act as a new paradigm to promote localism in planning and development in any number of areas where the bureaucracy has become so bogged down and it cost millions of dollars and takes decade to do anything.

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Barry Cassidy will be one of two hundred and fifty invited attendees at this year's Urban Age Conference in Addis Ababa Ethiopia. Holding the conference in Addis Ababa considers the city as both a relevant and an exceptional case study in understanding trajectories of urban development.

Like many other cities on the African continent, it has witnessed a remarkable transformation in recent decades. Addis Ababa's urban development is a demonstration of the national government's unprecedented commitment to plan and transform the city through investments in transport, infrastructure, housing and real estate, combined with policies that target the economic bases and spatial organization of urbanization, including those concerned with industrialization and relations with secondary cities.



The Urban Age "Developing Urban Futures" conference, jointly organized by LSE Cities at the London School of Economics and the Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft, will focus on the development of cities in rapidly urbanizing countries. By convening urban experts, policymakers and practitioners from sub-Saharan Africa and other world cities, the conference will raise questions about the economic foundations of urban change and investigate how current models of planning and governance succeed or fail to achieve greater integration between efficiency, accessibility and social justice. This will be the seventeenth Urban Age conference organized since 2005, most recently in Delhi, the Venice Biennale, Hong Kong, Rio de Janeiro and London.



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