

WHAT MAKES THE READING TO PHILADELPHIA TRAIN PROJECT SO COMPELLING?



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

By Barry Cassidy

The first time I tried to work on passenger rail service to Phoenixville (Greenline project), I thought we had a good chance of completing the project, and, at the time, the Citizens for the Train group was in high gear. There was a contribution from Liberty Property Trust to do the initial study, and there was participation from Norfolk Southern as we negotiated for the line.

That project ended when we could not get a grant for the alternative analysis. We were applying to the Delaware Regional Planning Commission for a Transportation and Community Development Initiative (TCDI) grant when we found we did not have the backing of Chester County and that we were not the number one (#1) project for this money in our Borough. It was somewhat important to me that the Northern Relief Route plans were more important, but it was a good project.

Fast forward today, ten or so years later. The Northern Relief Route seems to have been deemed as not viable. That news saddened me, but it spoke volumes concerning how decisions are made and what opportunities could have happened, vanquished years later, and what was sacrificed could have made a world of difference.

On Hollywood Squares, there was always a "Paul Lynde to block" request to control the center. It is hard for me to operate in a Hollywood squares

atmosphere. In the Greenline, I had multiple obstacles in terms of support, and we were forced to discontinue our effort.

The term "grassroots" applied to our project — with 200 or so people in Phoenixville seeking to make a difference. It was an educational experience for me, as it was a regional project, and it was hard to get consensus. Stuff like being in the middle of negotiating price from Norfolk Southern and the County staff calling and ask if they could buy the line for a trail. At one of our meetings, someone from the County Transportation Department suggested we abandon the train and go bus rapid transit (BRT), creating confusion. Then, when I went to study the alternatives, it was not accepted.

I learned a lot from the process. If Liberty Property Trust had donated the road, in fee, through Great Valley Corporate Center, the National Surface Transportation Board (NSTB) would have accepted the value as a match.

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DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

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So basically, I could have done the project for little money using the road acquisition as a match and valuing the real estate by the group price to acquire a lot in the Great Valley Corporate Center.

All these lessons came at a price for me. The process disheartened me.

In 2019 coming back from Pittsburgh after my hiatus for family reasons, I was looking for a job. At the same time, I was finishing my graduate degree in London, and I was lucky enough to be hired by Phoenixville developer Manny DeMutis and given a few tasks, including trying the Greenline project again. When we started to talk about it, we met with resistance from the Borough Staff and an elected official. We were steered to the Norfolk Southern Freight line and told that the Borough was waiting for the King of Prussia line to build off that. When examined, we found that the high-speed Norristown line did not come anywhere near Phoenixville, so we undertook the project as Phoenixville to Philadelphia.

Within a few months, the people from Reading were advocating for the line to go to Reading. The people involved were all good people, and they did their study, we did ours, and we agreed to work together.

The opposition was starting to melt. The project became regional, and with the two plans floating around there, Penn DOT did a study proposing six stops, including Reading, Birdsboro, Pottstown, Royersford, Phoenixville, and King of Prussia. It gets a little confusing because the current King of Prussia project is not part of the Reading/Phoenixville project.

There is a distinction between the two projects. The current King of Prussia project will be a spur that stops at the King of Prussia Mall and a casino. The Reading/Phoenixville project stops along with traditional town centers. However, they are both worthy projects!

The Reading/Phoenixville project has been attempted twice with the Schuylkill Valley Metro and once with the R-6 Extension. Both projects failed to succeed for different reasons. The new effort will follow the Penn DOT plan and will feature a decentralized approach using value capture and creating Autonomous Transit Zones (ATZ) to accomplish the task. Is it a perfect approach? Probably not perfect, but it is an alternate way of looking at things. It is a "European Model" and mimics what I learned about train financing during my school project on the Royal Docks in London.

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The quantum leap in passenger rail funding is not the only innovation. Penn DOT also endorsed the use of dual-mode engines to avert the crippling costs of electrifying the line. Further, this line will provide access to some of the poorest populations in Pennsylvania. The line is also home to naturally occurring affordable housing. It is naturally occurring because the population income statistics are based on the "Area Median Income." As a result, many of the poor have been pushed to the Cities and suburban Main Street urban centers.

It is reasonable to assume that the line will accommodate for easing in social equity with the introduction of accessible and affordable transportation for everyone in the community, resulting in fair distribution of transportation resources and benefits and increased transportation choices.

The City of Reading would benefit from introducing a rail service to connect the 35.4 percent of the population living in poverty to job centers and the naturally occurring affordable housing located along the route. The current homeownership rate in Reading of 39.4 percent is significantly lower than the national average of 63.9 percent. In addition, the city averages less than the "one car per family" national average and has an average 24.3 minutes drive time to places

of employment. The poverty rate further down the proposed line, the 19 percent of the population of Pottstown, 14.3 percent of the population of Royersford, and 10 percent of the population living in Phoenixville will benefit from the increased mobility options job centers. The connection to the transit grid will provide limitless options for low to moderate-income people in both housing and employment.

The fact that everyone seems to have arrived at the same position, that the project is a necessity, is amazing in its own right. The political narrative I wove about the "Greenline" makes this project somewhat compelling, but the most compelling aspect of the project is *Transportation Equity*. The project could provide accessible and affordable transportation for everyone in the regional Route 422 corridor community, which will result in a fair distribution of transportation resources and benefits regardless of status.

It is the transportation equity that drives this project — not getting the cars off of Route 422. The intent of the line may have traffic benefits, but it is actually about the social importance of communities designing their destiny by being the driver of the process, not the driver in traffic.

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