

# PHOENIXVILLE TRAIN PROJECT CONTINUES TO MOVE FORWARD



## DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT By Barry Cassidy

The inter-city rail connection from Phoenixville continues to move forward. For purposes of moving the project forward, the Phoenixville School District voted to endorse the effort. The remaining entity to approve is Chester County. All relevant data has been sent to the county and awaits their endorsement to move the project forward.

What does it mean to move the project forward? Several entities need to coordinate on a more precise level. The first is for Southeast Pennsylvania Transit Authority to coordinate with Norfolk Southern concerning a simulation for track availability. The second is to nail down all of the capital costs with joint meetings to discuss what will be necessary. The third and most important item is to coordinate the funding to enable the project to proceed.

The local taxing jurisdiction would pledge a portion of revenues from five (5) new projects about to come online through 2025. These projects would provide what is called "local match." Local match is often used in grant funding to leverage other dollars.

For example, on Phoenixville's North Side, the borough council allocated \$250,000 for a \$500,000 streetscape project. They used it as a local match to attract commonwealth residential streetscape dollars in the sum of

\$250,000. We took it a little further at the Main Street CDC and then packaged in Community Development Block Grant funds in the amount of \$250,000 as the new match on the state money.

Although the initial sum looks large, we will seek to develop partnerships and be diversified in our approach recognizing that, in most cases, communities get in line for money that sometimes never materializes. Many of these projects are advanced only to the conceptual stage, enjoying the strong interest and support of influential champions, but not having yet been the subject of detailed studies or planning.

Still, others have already been studied to the point where capital and operating cost estimates have been calculated and ridership forecasts completed, but without final recommendations having been funded and placed on a TIP or Long-Range Transportation Program.

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## DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

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Why do localities like Phoenixville seek to have train service? What is so appealing about having a train station in your downtown? The fact that property values rise when you have access to rail transportation is a big plus in determining value. Train Service acts as a modifier for values within a three-mile radius of the station.

The secondary and probably the primary reason train service is good is the geospatial context that it creates when attracting new residents and new development. A viable real estate market could appear to suddenly start consuming the steroids of an additional modifier on the property values.

In the case of Phoenixville, the primary beneficiaries will be the homeowners as their property will become worth more, but the tax rate is frozen, so their taxes do not increase. The introduction of rail service also affects the value of new construction as well, and any additional rehabilitation would garner additional taxes. More than

anything, the project becomes viable because the community wants it to be sustainable and not because it is part of a grand plan for the region, which may or may not recognize the need for train service in a community.

There are challenges ahead for the project because the simulation for using the Norfolk Southern track will determine if the project will be viable. There are also the challenges concerning local control of the project and how that is framed. Probably the most significant problem, however, will be if the surrounding municipalities attempt to become part of the project. Our outreach to Schuylkill Township and Upper Merion Township has not borne fruit, and the project costs and revenue will reflect a Phoenixville centric project.

In the past, attempts to do this project originated in Montgomery County and not Chester County, although there was a joint effort.

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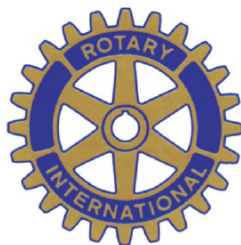
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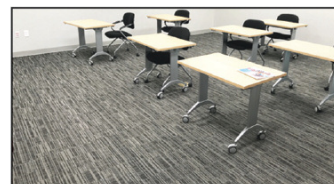
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Once it was to ask for a lot of federal dollars, and that was not successful, the second time, there was an effort to toll Route 422, and that also was not successful. In this effort, the locals have vacated the state position with local money and are attempting to deal with the federal programs on an equal footing. It is a form of localism whereby the locals will have more of a voice in how they position themselves regionally for development and prosperity.

The current transit funding system is very political, with money going into any number of pots from different taxes, pass-throughs, and the like. I have found that there is a pecking order in how the funds are dispersed, and many of the entities have been participating in that discussion for many years. New projects.... vision projects, often have to position themselves at the end of a long line for limited funds from amalgamated sources. Politics become brutal at this level with a project versus project, county versus county, and state versus state. There may also be private interests that may have positions of the location of public infrastructure, which

may align with all or none of the government entities. It is like swimming with the sharks in a way... and in a good way if you do not get eaten.

The Phoenixville project is a merit project. A project where the community has sought to get involved and adopt a finance scheme that largely avoids some to the local lines for funding and seeks to prove the merit of the project and hopefully arrive at an end that is satisfactory to everyone involved.

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