

Lafayette Street Extension project, Norristown, progressing on schedule



A northbound view of a stretch of Diamond Avenue across Ridge Pike in Plymouth Township, Monday, June 20, 2016. As part of the Lafayette Street Extension Project, the avenue, which was once offset to the east of Fairfield Road, will be open to two-way traffic and turn into Fairfield Road at the intersection. A northbound view of a stretch of Diamond Avenue across Ridge Pike in Plymouth Township, Monday, June 20, 2016. As part of the Lafayette Street Extension Project, the avenue, which was once offset to the east of Fairfield Road, will be open to two-way traffic and turn into Fairfield Road at the intersection. Digital First Media File Photo

By Oscar Gamble, The Times Herald

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NORRISTOWN >> Work is continuing on schedule on the Lafayette Street Extension project, which will reconstruct and widen Lafayette Street, extending it beyond Ford Street to Conshohocken Road and Diamond Avenue.

The Montgomery County Planning Commission, PennDOT and the Federal Highway Commission devised the project to spur economic growth by increasing the accessibility to downtown Norristown and the riverfront while improving the Conshohocken Road corridor through Ridge Pike in Plymouth Township.

According to the project's website, the construction is in accordance with both the Norristown and Montgomery County comprehensive plans as well as the Norristown Economic Revitalization Strategy.

The project also includes a new interchange between the turnpike and Lafayette Street, a 10-year, \$66 million undertaking funded by the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission.

“Right now it’s 3.4 miles from the interchange where it dumps you off onto Plymouth Road to DeKalb Street,” said Matthew Edmond, transportation section chief for the Montgomery County Planning Commission. “It takes about 13 minutes on average and the road changes names three times (Plymouth Road, Sandy Street and Airy Street) before you get to DeKalb Street.

“Once we have the interchange in, that 13 minutes goes down to two minutes, and that 3.4 miles goes down to 1.2 miles, and it’s one road, Lafayette Street. That’s a real noticeable difference,” Edmond noted, adding that he timed the new route himself.

The first phase of the project, the \$13.5 million extension of Lafayette Street, was completed in late 2014, and the restructuring of the Conshohocken Road–Ridge Pike corridor is almost finished.

“There’s just a couple of little things that we need to do, but the majority of the work is done,” Edmond said, noting that the roadway is now drivable and has been repaved with lane striping.

“At this point we just have to do a bit of landscaping work. Louis Auto Sales (1321 Ridge Pike) has a corner there that we have to put some plant material in and shape up.

“We have to put some liners in a couple of the rain guards we had to build, and we have to install some guide rails along the last part of the Lafayette Street extension where it meets up with Conshohocken Road now.”

Edmond said phase two should be completed by year’s end, but contractors will continue maintenance and quality control operations through next spring.

The third phase, the widening and reconstruction of Lafayette Street, is slated to begin in spring of 2017 and should be completed toward the end of 2019.

“We’re going to come back into downtown Norristown, and we’re going to transform the existing Lafayette Street that everybody knows and hates from Barbadoes to Ford (streets),” Edmond said. “We’re going to be taking down the viaducts where the Schuylkill River Trail is ... We’re going to clean that whole area up, and we’re going to widen the road quite a bit.

“It’s going to become more like a boulevard — two lanes in each direction with a landscaped center median, wide sidewalks on both sides, and a linear park area that will host the trail.”

An additional phase involving the construction of a half-diamond interchange — an interchange consisting of one entrance and one exit — connecting Lafayette Street with the Dannehower Bridge at Route 202 South was included by the planning commission during preliminary engineering, but won’t begin until the bridge comes to the end of its useful life and needs to be reconstructed, which engineers expect to occur sometime in the 2030s.

The cost of the current project, not including the turnpike interchange, is an estimated \$100 million.

And although each phase is independently budgeted according to its respective design, engineering and construction requirements, Edmond said the second phase of the project will be completed on time and within the budget.

With every milestone reached in the project’s development, Edmond sees the overall goal of increased accessibility and economic revitalization coming to fruition.

“We are starting to see the real estate market starting to churn a little bit,” he said. “We’re starting to see it in Plymouth Township and we’re starting to see it in Norristown.

“The signs are evident. Wawa is starting construction, or will be soon, right there at Conshohocken Road and Ridge Pike, and they’re there partly because they know that they’re going to be located right next to an interchange. (Auto Dealer) DriveTime is just down the street, half a block away. They came in knowing that the interchange would be there some day.

“Back in Norristown, Five Saints Distillery is there in part because they believe that revitalization is coming into Norristown and the interchange is a big part of that.

“We’ve also gotten phone calls from developers as well, talking about what the project is going to do ... And they’re very interested in it.”

Edmond allowed that the true economic impact of the project probably won’t be felt until the completion of the turnpike interchange, but said the fact that businesses and individuals are beginning to express interest now, bodes well for the project’s objectives.

He has also received positive feedback from motorists who appreciate the abbreviated drive times on the widened area of Ridge Pike, which has cut the commute through the corridor by about five minutes, he said.

“It doesn’t sound like a lot, but when you’re sitting in traffic it feels a lot longer and it really is a noticeable difference,” he said. “People have said, ‘This thing is great.’”

He has already fielded inquiries from drivers asking about the time line for the opening of the Wawa.

“It’s already starting to make a difference,” he said.