

## Lafayette Project Gets \$9M Boost

By Margaret Gibbons  
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COURTHOUSE - The beginning of phased construction of Norristown's proposed Lafayette Street Corridor transportation project is three years away. But the project, which many believe is the key to the economic revitalization of the financially beleaguered county seat, Tuesday received a financial boost that will take it into that construction phase.

With a crowd of some 30 onlookers gathered under a tent on the Lafayette Street side of the building housing the county redevelopment authority, Congressman Jim Gerlach, R-6th Dist., Tuesday presented county officials with a \$9.62 million check for the project.

"Recognizing the importance of this project, I wanted to continue moving this ball down the field," said Gerlach, noting that, of the \$38 million he was able to secure this year for transportation projects in his district, the allocation for this project was the single largest appropriation.

The project is designed to provide easier access to the borough's downtown business district as well as to open the borough's riverfront along the Schuylkill River for development.

"The reality right now is that the Norristown exit on the turnpike takes you into Plymouth Meeting," said Montgomery County Commissioners Chairman James R. Matthews.

Brian O'Neill, chairman of O'Neill Properties and selected to serve as the "master developer" of Norristown's redevelopment, said that the lack of easy access to the borough is obvious when, using a helicopter, "you see the interchanges" in the more affluent communities of Upper Merion, Conshohocken and Plymouth.

One of the major recommendations for the transportation project calls for the construction of new electronic slip ramps from the Pennsylvania Turnpike that would connect to the west end of an extended Lafayette Street east of Conshohocken Road in Plymouth.

Other components of the project include:

- \* Extending Lafayette Street beyond its current dead-end at Ford Street to Conshohocken Road.
- \* Total reconstruction of Lafayette Street, with two lanes in both directions.
- \* Construction of an exit ramp from the Dannehower Bridge to Lafayette Street to avoid traffic tie-ups on Markley Street.
- \* Widening the DeKalb Street underpass at Lafayette Street.
- \* Visual enhancements, streetscape improvements and improvements for pedestrians along both Lafayette and Main streets.

The estimated total cost of the feasibility study, environmental studies, design and engineering work is about \$20 million.

Gerlach's check will take monies accumulated for the project to about \$22 million, allowing some \$2 million to be used to begin acquiring rights-of-way and moving utilities and to begin the first phase of construction.

County Transportation Planning Chief Leo D. Bagley estimated that total construction will cost about \$100 million, with the federal government putting up about 80 percent of that money.

The first construction phase will be the "total reconstruction, sidewalk to sidewalk" of Lafayette Street, according to Bagley. That work will begin in 2008, he said. "Once we start work, people will begin to believe," said Bagley, adding that the county hopes to have the total project completed by 2012 or 2013.

Paul B. Bartle, a former county commissioner and chairman of the redevelopment authority who has long championed the rebirth of the borough, said that, in the past, when he talked about the revitalization of Norristown "many would just roll their eyes." Now, he said, there is only a "partial rolling of the eyes."

"This will happen," said Bartle. "We are on our way."

State Rep. Jackie Crahalla, R-150th Dist., said when she first moved to the area some 40 years ago, a friend invited her to go into the "city" with her. That city was a "hustling and bustling Norristown," she said.

"I want to see Norristown return to those days of glory," she said.

Margaret Gibbons can be reached at [mgibbons@timesherald.com](mailto:mgibbons@timesherald.com) or 610-272-2501 ext. 216.

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