

Lafayette Street Connection Seen as Key to Revitalization

By Keith Phucas
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NORRISTOWN - Planners believe connecting Lafayette Street to Route 202 and the Pennsylvania Turnpike will enable better access for shoppers coming into the borough as its revitalization gains momentum.

On Wednesday, engineering firm McCormick, Taylor & Associates laid out possibilities and sought input at the first public meeting for the Lafayette Street Transportation Improvements project. There was a hearty turnout for the event held at the Montgomery County Human Services building on Fornance Street.

Using a large aerial photograph of the riverfront area, project coordinator Chris Howsare pointed to the faint outline of a cul-de-sac at Lafayette Street's west end, where a road connection is envisioned.

Doug Jones, who manages Weinstein Supply, 660 E. Main St., was weighing whether to invest in renovations at his nearby shop. Jones was upbeat about the prospects of change along the Lafayette Street corridor.

"I see it as a potential positive to attract more customers into our store," he said. "I'd love to see this area built up. For it to be beautiful - period."

Northbound motorists traveling across the Dannehower Bridge might eventually be able to take an off-ramp onto Lafayette Street, which planners believe will be a central focus for Norristown's riverfront revitalization. Commuters could access the bridge going toward King of Prussia at a future on-ramp on the opposite side of Route 202.

At the other end of Lafayette Street, the road ends abruptly at Ford Street, at the head of a recreational trail. Planners want to extend the road along the river bend and join it to Conshohocken Road and the turnpike via an electronic toll interchange, or slip ramp.

Once riverfront and borough improvements are under way, Howsare said, the people will come.

"By creating easy access from the major roads, people would be more likely to visit Lafayette Street and the rest of the borough," she said.

But specifics on commercial development are still a ways away. For now, McCormick's planners are focusing on how to put the road through the borough and into Plymouth.

"This project is strictly about the road," she said. "It is very early yet."

Some residents of Plymouth's Ross Street were curious about how close a future turnpike ramp would be to their neighborhood. That is still an open question, said Howsare, and public concerns are key to the future course of her firm's planning efforts.

"If we know there's a concern, we can engineer around it the best we can," she said.

It may be impossible to please everyone. However, other remedies may help soften the blow of a major road project for those living near the area, such as sound walls.

"If we can't avoid the impact, then we look for mitigative measures," she said.

During the three-hour meeting, area residents wrote their comments down on paper. Others took forms home to fill out and return by mail.

"Lots of people were in favor of the project," Howsare said.

The project has gotten the thumbs-up from the Norristown Economic Revitalization Strategy, the Draft Montgomery County Comprehensive Plan and the Redevelopment Area Plan for the Riverfront Development.

In the near future, the firm will conduct environmental analyses, perform noise and air quality studies and draw preliminary engineering plans for the improvement area. Eventually, a second public meeting will be scheduled sometime in spring or summer of next year. Some things can't be rushed, Howsare said.

"We don't want to come back until we have a lot more to show," she said.

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