

Lafayette Street Corridor project moves ahead

Published: Friday, January 8, 2010

By KEITH PHUCAS
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COURTHOUSE — Montgomery County has reached an agreement with PennDOT and the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission that clears the way for the \$120 million Lafayette Street Corridor project that would make Norristown readily accessible from the turnpike.

At the commissioners meeting Thursday, Planning Commission Assistant Director Leo Bagley said the county is acquiring right of way for land needed to widen Lafayette Street and extend the dead-end street to connect with Conshohocken Road in Plymouth Township. The work is expected to begin in 2011.

“By the end of the year, we should have our right of way plans completed,” Bagley said. “We’re in very good shape.”

Following construction to extend the street, the Turnpike Commission is slated to build an electronic interchange with “slip ramps” that will lead traffic directly onto Lafayette Street and into Norristown’s commercial district.

The project, to be completed in 2017, is expected to transform a county seat long stigmatized by a blighted urban core.

“This is a project of vital importance to the economic development of this region,” said Commissioners’ Chairman James R. Matthews.

Bagley said planners are within a month of signing a memo of agreement with the two agencies.

The Norristown project is expected to take seven years to build, because the work will be funded piecemeal.

“By the time we’re finished it’ll be 2017, because we had to stretch it out,” Edmond said.

The Turnpike Commission is set to pay about \$62 million to build three ramps at the planned interchange just over a quarter-mile from Norristown; PennDOT’s share of the project is \$48 million; and with federal funding paying 80 percent of the county’s portion, its share is around \$12 million, according to Senior Transportation Planner Matthew Edmond.

The project is on the Transportation Improvement Programs (TIP) to get federal funding, Edmond said, and the county is working to keep it on the next TIP for October 2010. The

TIP represents U.S. regions' transportation improvement priorities and is required by federal law.

"The TIP is amended every month and undergoes a major overhaul every two years," he said.

In case the project gets dropped from the TIP, planners are lobbying the U.S. Department of Transportation to make I-80 a toll highway in hopes the county could tap future revenues to pay for the local roadwork.

Recently, planners sent a letter to Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood asking that the interstate highway be tolled. Copies of the letter were also sent to the Pennsylvania congressional delegation.

Bagley called the Lafayette Street project plan "transformational" and said the original studies for work date back to 1999.

"The slip ramps will give this project a far-reaching impact," he said.

Commissioners working on transportation authority

By: MARGARET GIBBONS

The Intelligencer, September 7, 2010

It will have the power to condemn properties for transportation projects.

The Montgomery County commissioners opened their commerce and economic development tool box the other week and discovered something was missing - their power to condemn properties for transportation projects.

County solicitor Barry M. Miller said that state lawmakers, in amending the law governing Second Class and Second Class A counties in 2005, omitted the eminent domain powers for road projects.

Allegheny County is a second class county while Montgomery, Bucks and Berks counties are 2A counties.

Miller, who said he believes the omission was inadvertent, pointed out that other sections allowing the use of eminent domain powers for park and county projects remained intact.

Acting on Miller's recommendation, the commissioners began the process of creating a county transportation authority that will have eminent domain powers.

As now envisioned, nine board members will serve on what Commissioner Chairman James R. Matthews said will be a "nonpartisan venture." Democratic Chairman Joseph M. Hoeffel III will make four appointments, Republican Commissioner Bruce L. Castor Jr. will have three appointments and Matthews, a Republican, will appoint two members including the authority chairman.

Asked why the county needed so many members on the authority, Matthews said he repeatedly is contacted by citizens who want to serve the county.

While the commissioners said that they will place the issues before the authority, there is nothing that prevents the quasi-independent authority from acting on its own within the confines of the state law allowing authorities.

The county resolution announcing the proposed creation of the authority said the commissioners intend for the authority "to own, operate, maintain and improve transportation (other than mass transit), bridges, tunnels, highways, parkways, traffic distribution centers, parking spaces . . ."

Miller called this language "boilerplate."

The authority will use its eminent domain powers as directed by the commissioners and perform other tasks that the commissioners assign to it, said Miller.

Miller and the commissioners said that the authority will not be able to run amuck because it has no money and the commissioners could disband it at any time.

"There is no question in my mind that the commissioners will control the authority and we will not have a rogue authority," said Hoeffel.

Montgomery County intends to use eminent domain for several property condemnations that the county believes are necessary for the \$160-million-plus Lafayette Street Corridor project in Norristown's downtown business district.

Area officials have called the project, which includes the development of an electronic Norristown interchange on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, the "key" that is needed for the revitalization of the county seat and the development of Norristown's frontage on the Schuylkill River.

Asked what other tasks the commissioners had in mind for the authority, county officials said that authority members could serve as "cheerleaders" for a \$150 million local transportation improvement program that the commissioners are championing. They hope to put the initiative on the ballot next year to secure voters' approval to borrow the \$150 million to finance congestion relieving road projects.

Also, county officials said, that if tolling ever became a reality for Route 422, the authority could help out with that.

The commissioners will vote on creating the authority following a public hearing that will be scheduled for next month.

Bucks officials were not concerned on learning they did not have condemnation powers for road projects.

"Montgomery County is different from Bucks County because Montgomery County actually owns county roads," said Bucks County Chief Clerk/Executive Planning Commission Director Lynn Bush.

"We have no county roads in Bucks," said Bush. "All Bucks County roads are either PennDOT roads or local municipal roads so the need for us to condemn does not exist."

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September 07, 2010 02:30 AM