

Lafayette Street Project Unveiled

By Dan Kelley
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NORRISTOWN - The public got a look at an estimated \$100 million project to build an access ramp to the Pennsylvania Turnpike at Lafayette Street in 2008 Wednesday night.

The plan, which some are hailing as a boon for economic development in the borough, will widen Lafayette Street from the turnpike to Route 202, according to the Montgomery County Planning Commission.

At least five residential properties in Plymouth will be condemned or purchased to make room for the project, according to planning maps.

Additionally, according to projections, at least two commercial properties in Norristown are in the project's path.

Officials may have to purchase more properties to make room for the new highway as the project proceeds.

Marc Chalphin, chair of the Greater Norristown Corp., a group that works toward economic development in the area, said he supports the project.

I've been in business in Norristown since 1975," Chalphin said. "This is the most important project with the biggest economic impact since then."

Leo Bagley, head of the transportation section of the Montgomery County Planning Commission, said that though no economic impact study has been completed for the project, Norristown would benefit.

"Intuitively, any developer will tell you that improving access to Norristown will improve the market," Bagley said.

Some residents of the Mogeetown section of Plymouth Meeting say the construction could damage their houses when large construction vehicles start rumbling through the area.

"Our homes are over 100 years old with stone foundations," said Joanne Bennich of the first block of Chestnut Street in Plymouth. "Who will pay for the damage when foundations start crumbling? From what I gather, nobody is thinking about this."

"They said they would put a sound wall up," said Helen Hack, who lives on the first block of Richardson Street. "Our other concern is the vibrations from the trucks and the foundations of our houses. These homes are at least 160 years old."

Wednesday's meeting was the public's second look at the plans. Both Bennich and Hack said they voiced their concerns at the first meeting, held in November 2002.

Hack said she spoke with a noise engineer at the meeting, but nobody could speak to her about truck traffic.

Bennich, who has lived in her house for 11 years, said she would take a buyout if one were offered.

But Hack, who has lived in her home for 25 years, said she actively wanted the builders to purchase her home.

"Most people here," Hack said, "would be willing to give up their houses, but I don't know if that is going to happen."

The project is technically still in the planning stages, officials report. Officials have identified six historic structures and one historic district that could be affected by the project.

Officials will submit environmental studies for the project in the spring of 2004. They anticipate environmental approval by next fall.

Bagley said the project would be paid for with federal, state and county funds. The borough will not have to use any of its money.

Lafayette Street would be widened to four lanes. Ford, Franklin, Walnut and Mill streets will have access to Lafayette.

Either Diamond Street, already the scene of the four potential purchases, or Lucetta Street will become a cul-de-sac.

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