

Lafayette Street Transportation Project Moves Forward

By Margaret Gibbons

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COURTHOUSE - The construction of road improvements proposed in connection with the Lafayette Street Transportation project is still three to four years down the road but the project is inching forward.

The Montgomery County commissioners Thursday approved reimbursing the Norfolk Southern Corp. up to \$60,000 for work by the railroad's staff in coordinating the preliminary engineering work and agreements that might be needed in connection with the project.

For example, said county Deputy Chief Operating Officer Steven L. Nelson, the proposed improvements might require the county purchasing easement rights to some of the railroad's right-of-way or even moving some track.

In addition, the railway has a bridge traveling over Conshohocken Road near an area where project plans call for the construction of new electronic toll slip ramps that would connect the Pennsylvania Turnpike to an extended Lafayette Street at Conshohocken Road, said Nelson.

The \$60,000 also will cover similar costs by Norfolk Southern in another project - the proposed widening of Ridge Pike from Butler Pike in Plymouth to the Norristown borough line, according to county transportation planner Nelia Dyer.

Of the \$60,000, the state Department of Transportation will foot 80 percent of the tab, the state Turnpike Commission will chip in with another 10 percent of the costs involving the Lafayette Street project, Dyer said.

The county's share of these costs amounts to \$9,000, she said.

The Lafayette Street corridor runs along Norristown's industrial waterfront, one block south of and parallel to Main Street, the borough's main business district. It begins at the Dannehower Bridge, which carries southbound Route 202 traffic between Norristown and Upper Merion.

County and borough officials and members of the business community long have believed that road improvements in that corridor are key to the revitalization of the borough, whether it is to open up the waterfront area for development or bring motorists into the downtown business district.

One of the major recommendations in an early feasibility study called for the construction of new electronic toll slip ramps. The theory is that this will bring more motorists into the borough while also making it easier for drivers wanting to make the borough their destination.

Construction of these interchange improvements will be about \$40 million of the estimated \$100-million-plus in construction costs.

Other corridor improvements recommended in that feasibility study include:

- 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.

County transportation officials said they believed the preliminary design work and environmental studies would be completed late this year or early next year. The county soon will begin soliciting proposals for the final engineering work in order that that work can get under way next year.

It will take about three years for the final engineering work to be completed, with construction to begin in late 2007 or early 2008 and be completed in 2010, according to transportation planners.

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