

Proposed Norristown Turnpike ramp lacks funding

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NORRISTOWN — Although the long-awaited Lafayette Street Corridor project is set to begin construction next year, the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission is not planning to fund a prized turnpike interchange that would funnel traffic into Norristown and provide the municipality an economic boost.

Thursday afternoon, following a Montgomery County Transportation Authority (MCTA) meeting, county officials and state lawmakers gathered to discuss the status of the Norristown project.

The \$60 million Lafayette Street project is fully funded, with the federal government paying for 80 percent of the work, but the Turnpike Commission dropped the planned local interchange from its capital budget in July. Aware the estimated cost of building a turnpike ramp is \$70 million, officials discussed ways to raise the money.

Designers envisioned the completed project with a turnpike interchange would make Norristown readily accessible from the highway. The construction, to be completed in 2017, promised to transform a county seat long stigmatized by a blighted urban core.

Mark Chalphin, president of Robert Chalphin Associates and a Greater Norristown Corporation member, said the the economic boon of having the highway interchange would be “incalculable.”

Leo Bagley, Assistant Director of the Planning Commission, said Thursday the county could repay the \$70 million interchange cost through toll revenues over a 10-year period. He also restated his belief that all major state roadways will one day be toll roads.

A bill introduced by state Sen. John Rafferty, chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, proposes funding the planned interchange through a public-private partnership.

Rafferty, who was not at the meeting, said in a previous interview that with government funding scarce, joining with the private sector to fund transportation is an obvious alternative.

“We recognize the critical need for dollars into our infrastructure here in the Commonwealth, and quite frankly, it’s been difficult for the state to come up with funds needed, and the federal government has cut back on transportation funds in the past few years,” he said.

Rafferty wants public-private partnerships to not only refurbish but also expand all the state’s transportation needs.

County Commissioners James R. Matthews, Joseph M. Hoeffel and Bruce L. Castor Jr. were joined at the afternoon meeting by state Sen. Daylin Leach and Reps. Kate Harper, Mike Vereb and Matt Bradford and members of the MCTA and the Planning Commission.

The group decided to renew the pitch for the prized interchange to the Turnpike Commission.

Prior to the discussion, Senior Transportation Planner Matthew Edmond made a presentation on the Lafayette Street project for MCTA board members, who authorized contracts for appraisals on land acquisitions for the project.