

## Turnpike Onboard Lafayette Project

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COURTHOUSE -- The Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission is financially onboard the proposed Lafayette Street Corridor project, which Montgomery County officials claim is key to the economic revitalization of Norristown.

The county commissioners this week received a letter from the commission, stating that the commission is "happy to partner with" the county in the project that is designed to improve traffic in, out and through the borough.

The letter said the commission has given its staff the go-ahead to execute an agreement with the county to fund 10 percent, up to \$300,000, of the estimated \$2 million to \$3 million cost for the preliminary engineering and environmental studies for the entire project.

The county already has agreed to put up a similar 10 percent of the costs while the federal government will pay the remaining 80 percent, according to county Transportation Planning Chief Leo D. Bagley.

"This is great news," said Bagley, who has been overseeing the project.

Bagley said the county is hoping to hire an engineering firm by the end of the summer to perform the studies.

It will take about three years to complete the necessary studies.

The county commissioners in February asked the turnpike commission to join with them in the project, pointing out that the turnpike will benefit from some of the improvements being proposed for the \$40 million project.

The corridor project study calls for Lafayette Street to be realigned to directly provide access to the Route 202 Dannehower Bridge, which spans the Schuylkill River and links Norristown and Upper Merion, at the western end of the corridor.

On the eastern end of the corridor, the plan calls for the extension of Lafayette Street beyond its current dead end at Ford Street to Conshohocken Road in Plymouth. It is here that the study recommended that a new electronic slip-ramp turnpike toll interchange be built.

"The county feels that there is a tremendous regional benefit to accomplishing this project," the county commissioners wrote in a letter sent to the turnpike commission last month. "Not only will the existing Valley Forge, Norristown and Mid-County interchanges benefit greatly from a reduction in congestion, but a new access point at Conshohocken Road will improve access to the ongoing significant growth in the Conshohocken area as well as spur redevelopment efforts in Norristown."

The commissioners' letter also asked the turnpike commission, in the design work already under way for the widening of the turnpike between the Norristown and Valley Forge interchanges, to consider the need to replace the Ridge Pike Bridge over

the turnpike to accommodate the acceleration and deceleration lanes that will be needed for the proposed new electronic toll.

Once the initial studies are completed, the county has proposed that it will provide the local funding needed for the final design, land acquisition and construction phases for the Lafayette Street corridor from the Dannehower Bridge east to Conshohocken Road while the turnpike commission would pick up the local tab for the electronic interchange and improvements of Conshohocken Road to accommodate that interchange.

The project also calls for visual enhancements, streetscape improvements and pedestrian improvements along Lafayette and Main streets in the borough.

The county redevelopment authority and the borough have entered into an agreement with O'Neill Properties to serve as the principal developer for the borough's redevelopment area, particularly along the riverfront. The county has estimated that the private investment in the redevelopment project will be about \$200 million.

While Brian O'Neill has not labeled the improvement of the corridor as a deal-breaker, he has said the proposed improvements "will clearly ensure the success" of the redevelopment project.

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