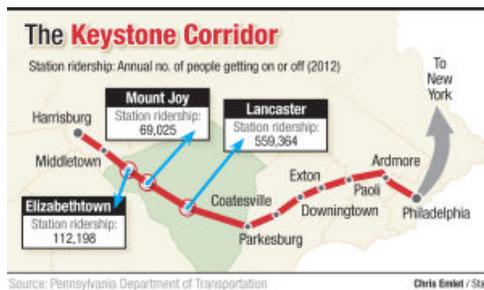


Summit takes big-picture view of Keystone rail corridor

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The trains run faster and ridership is growing on the Keystone rail line between Harrisburg and Philadelphia, thanks to millions of dollars poured into track and station upgrades.

So here's the question, PennDOT's Toby Fauver told attendees at the Keystone Corridor "stakeholders' summit": How can local and regional planners build on that? What steps will best foster healthy economic development in the corridor and its communities?

The PennDOT-sponsored summit, held Wednesday at the Lancaster County Convention Center, brought together several dozen planners, government and transit officials and so on to brainstorm some answers.

PennDOT has held local and regional stakeholder meetings, but this is the first one for the corridor as a whole, Fauver said.

Municipal planning and permitting are inherently local endeavors. PennDOT believes planners along the corridor must coordinate their efforts for the Keystone to truly flourish.

There are 12 stations on the line, of which three are in Lancaster: Elizabethtown, Mount Joy and the city station. The busiest station is Philadelphia; Harrisburg used to be No. 2, but Lancaster surpassed it last year.

Fauver likened the railroad line to an interstate, and the stations to interchanges. Interchanges are where growth happens, and good planning helps promote the kind of growth you want, he said.

Attendees spent much of the session in breakout sessions, analyzing the corridor's strengths and weaknesses and suggesting ways to remedy the latter.

Repeatedly, the same themes emerged. On the one hand, the Keystone is a valuable, underappreciated asset, connecting small communities in southcentral Pennsylvania with Philadelphia, New York and the whole Northeast metropolitan corridor.

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LancasterOnline.com, June 28, 2014

page 2

There are promising redevelopment opportunities around many stations. Construction costs are reasonable. The communities in the corridor are established, generally affordable, and the overall quality of life is good.

On the other hand, many elements on the line still aren't in great shape. Stations lack parking and good signage. Connections with local transit systems are far from seamless.

Private developers rarely think it's worth investing in projects around train stations without an assist from public dollars: The return just isn't there.

Meeting organizers collected all the comments and proposals. They will be edited and refined and will form a basis for future discussion and planning.

PennDOT is evolving "to think more broadly about how we support communities," Fauver said.

Fauver is the agency's deputy secretary for multimodal transportation. Under the state's new transportation funding law, his role has expanded to include oversight of almost everything that isn't roads or bridges, he said.

Just getting the summit's participants to realize how much they have in common was a big step forward, Fauver said. They also came away with a greater appreciation of the constraints PennDOT faces, he said.

People always want their local project prioritized, but "we can't afford to do everything at once," he said.

source: LancasterOnline.com