

## New PennDOT bridge could mean faster trains on tracks below

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This bridge will carry Eby Chiques Road over the railroad tracks near Mount Joy Borough. It is expected to open to traffic in September. Completion will allow faster Amtrak trains on the rails underneath.

Tuesday night, workers are slated to pour concrete on a new bridge over Amtrak rails.

When completed in September, the new Eby Chiques Road bridge will be an improvement for the roadway at the eastern edge of Mount Joy Borough and Rapho Township.

More importantly, it could help speed the trains passing underneath.

Eby Chiques Road is the last public at-grade railroad crossing on Amtrak's 104-mile Keystone Corridor.

With the elimination of the crossings and other changes, Amtrak plans to increase the top speed of trains on the corridor from 110 mph to 125 mph and shave minutes off travel times between Lancaster and Harrisburg and Lancaster and Philadelphia.

When that will actually happen remains unclear.

"This is getting us closer to the 125 top speed; it will definitely improve travel time," said Erin Waters-Trasatt, deputy press secretary of the state's Department of Transportation.

Waters-Trasatt and Amtrak spokesman Craig Schulz said having faster trains will require more than sealing the corridor to prevent crossing traffic.

A new interlocking signal system being installed near Harrisburg, at a cost of \$40 million, also is part of the modernization effort, Waters-Trasatt said. That project is expected to be completed by the end of the year.

Station improvements planned for the Mount Joy station and soon beginning at Middletown and other stations will also contribute to faster trains, said David Royer, Lancaster County's transportation planning director.

The higher, 500-foot-long platforms being constructed at Amtrak stations along the corridor will allow passengers to board and depart trains more quickly through more doors on the train, Royer noted. That will allow the trains to get moving more quickly en route to the next station.

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Yet, the elimination of at-grade crossings has been high on the list of improvements for several years.

The \$7.86 million Eby Chiques Road bridge project follows the construction of a new bridge on Garfield Road in 2011 and the closing of the Irishtown Road crossing in Leacock Township last year.

The last step in the Eby Chiques project is the closure of nearby Newcomer Road. That road will end in cul-de-sacs on each side of the railroad tracks, said Mike Sisson, of Michael Baker Jr. Inc., the project's construction manager.

In anticipation of the Newcomer Road closure at the end of October, Eby Chiques was enlarged to accommodate the increased traffic, Royer said.

When completed, the bridge will have two 11-foot travel lanes flanked by seven-foot shoulders. It will be connected to Route 230 by about a third of a mile of new road.

A larger bridge also was built two years ago to carry Eby Chiques Road traffic over Chiques Creek.

Before the new railroad overpass, Eby Chiques Road carried about 1,647 vehicles per day. With the opening, that number is expected to increase to 2,400, Sisson said.

"All three or four of these things are part of a package that started several years ago. The Eby Chiques bridge was the last piece of the puzzle," Royer said.

Schulz, of Amtrak, said the 110 mph top speed currently on the Keystone line makes "it the fastest in the U.S. outside of the Northeast Corridor."

The 125-mph speed remains the goal, he wrote in an email message on Sunday. When that goal could be realized, he did not say.

With the elimination of the corridor's last three at-grade crossings, all in Lancaster County, "they will no longer be an impediment to speed," said PennDOT's Waters-Trasatt.

There will now be longer stretches that trains will be able to operate at higher speeds.

"It gives them the ability to go 125. Will they ever go 125? I don't know," said Royer, noting the relative short distances between some stations on the line.

Waters-Trasatt also clarified that Eby Chiques Road is the Keystone's last public rail crossing. A private crossing remains near Eby Chiques Road to access farmland, she said. Waters-Trasatt did not know whether there are plans to eliminate that crossing.

*source: LancasterOnline.com*