

Trains, planes, ports: What improvements are in the works in PA?

By Barbara Miller

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Next spring, contracts could be awarded to start improvements at Middletown's Amtrak Station, a PennDOT official told the Harrisburg Regional Chamber and CREDC Tuesday morning during the annual transportation briefing.

Toby Fauver, PennDOT deputy secretary for multi-modal transportation, outlined projects in the works for not only Middletown but Harrisburg, Coatesville and Pittsburgh-Harrisburg service.

Fauver, who oversees transportation other than roads and bridges, also provided an update on port, airport and other improvements under Act 89, the state transportation bill.

Middletown's \$32 million train station project is complicated, Fauver said, since it involves a complete relocation of the platform to meet ADA requirements.

Since the existing Mill Street station is on a curve, it had to be moved to a straight section of track, or else the gap between platform and tracks would be too wide to meet ADA requirements.

Plus, the site chosen is between two other off-loading tracks – Norfolk-Southern and Hummelstown-Middletown Railroad. PennDOT will spend millions to spread the tracks apart, he said. This will be the only center-loading platform in the state other than Harrisburg and Lancaster, he said.

"Therein lies the challenge," Fauver said. Amtrak has a limited labor force, so that will determine timing of the track relocation. The total project could take up to two years to complete, PennDOT has said.

Next spring, PennDOT hopes to award a contract to the team that will build the platform and related improvements, which include pedestrian or shuttle connections to Middletown's downtown, Penn State Harrisburg and Harrisburg International Airport. Additional land was acquired to allow for more parking at the new station, he said.

A large project is also under way at Harrisburg's Amtrak station. It will involve improvements that will allow speed of trains coming into the station to increase from 35 to 80 mph. The total project is over-budget, and will cost about \$47 million, he said.

With closing of three grade crossings in Lancaster and signal upgrades, Fauver said maximum train speed will increase to 125 mph from the current 110 mph.

This will reduce trip times by 10 minutes between Harrisburg and Philadelphia.



Update On Harrisburg Amtrak Station Improvements

Toby Fauver, PennDOT deputy multi-modal transportation secretary, outlines plans for the new Middletown train station.

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The deteriorated Coatesville station is also getting a facelift. After arsons left properties in the area abandoned, PennDOT committed to a project that will not only improve the station, but the area around it. Burned-out buildings were acquired, and PennDOT is trying to form a development team to make long-range improvements.

Fauver also hopes to see service to Pittsburgh doubled over 10 years, and add another train between Harrisburg and Philadelphia.

Regarding the port of Philadelphia, Fauver said about \$25 million has been allocated for maintenance of infrastructure, and \$400 million on dredging the Delaware River to a depth of 47 feet to accommodate larger ships. Also, proposals are being accepted for development of the 120-acre old Navy base owned by the Philadelphia Port Authority.

Last year, a \$25 incentive was created for every new container brought into the port, up to total of \$1 million. In May, the port of Philadelphia hit an all-time high for container traffic, which helps increase railroad, trucking and port jobs, and increases opportunities for warehousing, distribution and manufacturing in the region.

Investments are also occurring in ports at Pittsburgh and Erie.

On the public transportation front, Fauver outlined the transit consolidation study under way involving Adams, York, Lebanon, Dauphin, Cumberland, Franklin, Perry and possibly Berks and Lancaster counties.

Counties are now deciding whether they want to begin discussions into critical issues on what a consolidated transit system would look like, including governance, budgets and more.

Consolidation would allow a dollar-for-dollar reduction in counties' local match for their transit systems over five years, and funding levels resume after that at level where they left off.

Berks and Lancaster have already merged their administrative structures, saving \$800,000 a year.

In other areas, Fauver gave these updates:

Pipelines: PennDOT is studying ways to make transporting oil and gas by rail safer, but Fauver said the safest way is probably through a pipeline.

"We believe pipelines are transportation and part of making freight move. If we move it through pipelines we don't have to put it on trucks and save on infrastructure," Fauver said.

Harrisburg International Airport: The challenge is for good marketing to encourage people to use local airlines in the wake of airline mergers. "The only way we will see growth in airline service in Harrisburg and smaller airports is to see the growth in demand to go with it," Fauver said.

Federal funding: A federal transportation funding package is vital for the economy, Fauver said. Federal funding has stagnated, putting the burden on the states.

As under-investment in infrastructure occurs and repairs are postponed, it ends up costing more to completely rebuild it.

Act 89, the state's latest transportation bill, provided three tiers of multi-modal funding, Fauver said.

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The first included \$10 million each for freight and port investment; \$6 million each for passenger rail and aviation; and \$2 million for bicycle/pedestrian trails.

In July 2016, PennDOT will award the second tier of funds, which includes discretionary funding for \$40 million of multi-modal projects, of which \$35 million is for roads and bridges. Applications are due by December.

This fall, grants will be awarded for the third tier of funds, for rail, streetscape, airport and bike/pedestrian trail projects.

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