

Upgrades for Chester County rail stations on track

By Jim Callahan, *Daily Local News*
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EAST WHITELAND >> New stations for three Amtrak railroad stations in Chester County are on the way.

Jennie Granger, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation official in charge of rail matters, said design work for a new Paoli station is under way. Completion and construction is scheduled to finish by 2018.

Plans for new stations in Downingtown and Coatesville are still being tweaked. But they are going to happen, she said.

Meanwhile, plans to increase parking at the Exton station have been approved.

The fifth Amtrak stop in Chester County is at Parkesburg. Plans to upgrade that station are on hold at the moment, she said. They haven't been forgotten.

Granger, director of PennDOT's Bureau of Aviation, which has control of the project, spoke Friday to the fall luncheon of the Transportation Management Association of Chester County.

She is overseeing improvements to the 104-mile-long Keystone rail corridor that runs from Philadelphia to Harrisburg.

The state has gained maintenance control of the line from Amtrak in recent years. Granger said the state is upgrading maintenance of the rail to improve rider comfort and speed of travel.

The state has garnered more federal funds for the rail service on the line since 2009. The transportation bill that passed the General Assembly last year will also help efforts. "It really solidified our ability to upgrade stations," said Granger.

One improvement happened Friday: the last on-grade crossing, located in Lancaster County, was blocked off. The entire line is now closed at a cost of \$20 million, allowing for higher train speeds and greater safety, said Granger.

The transportation management association represents local business and government interests in improving transportation for business and commuters in Chester County. They are a bridge with providers like PennDOT, SEPTA and Amtrak.

Getting all three on the same sheet of paper has taken years to move a project to improve and expand the Paoli train station, making it easier for people and buses to get to it. All three have a role in utilizing the station.

Finally, a lawsuit over handicapped access forced the interest groups into finding a solution. The parties signed an agreement with the court to fix Paoli by 2018 to allow access.

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Daily Local News, October 20, 2014

page 2

Granger said it was the best thing that could have happened. Architects are still working on final plans. The North Valley Road bridge will be removed. A new overpass from Darby Road just to the east will replace access.

All this will take time, Granger said.

Meanwhile, details on a new Coatesville rail station are still being worked out, she said. The station will replace the old station to the west. PennDOT is still working on agreements with the city and other parties for a final design.

The Downingtown project is moving forward, she said. PennDOT is still trying to work out details to increase pedestrian access along Brandywine Avenue (Route 322), and make the road in general easier for traffic. That station is moving from Johnsontown to a site that will remove old paper mills on either side of Brandywine Avenue, and fix up the roadway.

The Exton train station will be getting higher platforms to ease access to trains and more parking for commuters.

Parkesburg has not been forgotten, said Granger. Traffic is increasing in far western Chester County. The station is on the radar, but definitive plans will have to wait.

A problem with all Chester County stations on the line is parking. Where possible, PennDOT is exploring opportunities to increase parking. The agency is trying to make provisions to turn surface parking lots into garages in the future. When, Granger would not speculate.

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