

## Amtrak station can't come soon enough: Editorial

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The location of the new Amtrak train station along West Main Street in Middletown has been fenced off, in preparation for PennDOT to award a contract for construction of the station in March. STAFF PHOTO BY DAN MILLER

*“We know you’ve heard it before. We’ve said it before, in this very space: The proposed Amtrak train station at West Main and Ann streets is going to be built, and it will be a boon to Middletown. Just be patient.”*

In light of recent events involving the project, with contracts for construction likely to be awarded by March, that’s good advice to heed.

Forgive us if we’ve said it before. The italicized quote above is from an editorial we published June 24, 2015.

It’s been a long journey. But really, truly ... this is going to happen.

*“By the end of 2013, you should be boarding and stepping off Amtrak trains at two new platforms on each side of the tracks at West Main and Ann streets.”*

Yes, we realize that italicized statement was how we reported the announcement in 2010 that the station would move from its Mill Street location because of a lack of accessibility according to the Americans With Disabilities Act. That was the time line that Pennsylvania Department of Transportation officials gave almost a decade ago. It turns out the station was more of a challenge to complete than expected.

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But this time is different. The project was publicly advertised for bids by PennDOT on Dec. 19. It's the first time that a time line for awarding contracts has been so specific. This is also the first time that track work by both Norfolk Southern and Amtrak, which has been a sticking point for years, appears to be smoothed out.

Things have changed since that announcement of the location at West Main and Ann streets in December 2010. While we are still very excited about the new station opening, it's certainly not what was first expected.

Back then, there was talk by local developer Jim Nardo, who owned the land in the early 2010s, of a four-story hotel, restaurants and a grocery store on the site of the vacant AP Green warehouse. He wanted to combine the development with his adjacent Westporte Centre. In 2010, the old AP Green warehouse hadn't even been completely removed from the site.

Eventually, the PennDOT took almost 10 acres of the Westporte Centre property via eminent domain — the right of the government to expropriate private property for public use, with payment of compensation. PennDOT then wanted to enter into a public-private partnership to develop the site with many of the same amenities, to “design, build, finance, operate and maintain commercially viable facilities on state-owned parcels,” we reported in December 2015.

Keystone Connections was selected as this private partner in early 2017, but by late 2018 it had withdrawn from the project after determining that “revenues generated by potential commercial development and parking fees would not be enough to support the development costs and ongoing operating and maintenance expenses,” according to a PennDOT spokesman.

In other words, Keystone Connections decided it wouldn't make enough money on the project.

So now the project is slim compared to what it once was. There likely won't be a hotel. Keep in mind that when these discussions started, there were no hotels in the vicinity of the airport. Now there are two — the 123-room Fairfield Inn & Suites on Harrisburg International Airport property and the 87-room Comfort Inn and Suites Harrisburg Airport-Hershey South, part of the Linden Centre shopping complex along Route 230 at the airport connector.

We don't know if there will be any restaurants at the site, either. Again, things are a bit different than when this project first was discussed. The Hop Yard barbecue restaurant and bar opened in 2016 in Westporte, and that strip mall also now features a pizzeria and a Chinese restaurant.

While added commercial development would have been nice, what we lament the most is that a pedestrian bridge linking Penn State Harrisburg to the north of Route 230 to the Amtrak station is no longer planned. At a cost of \$7 million, it wasn't deemed worth it.

What an addition that would have been. It would have created a memorable look at the western entrance to the borough. It would have allowed easy access for students of the growing Penn State campus to go right down the extended Emaus Street and into the borough. But it looks like we will have to live without it. Instead, PennDOT has said it will improve pedestrian safety with improvements at the street level.

But let's not dwell on what could have been. The new location of the Amtrak station will continue to improve the Route 230 corridor. We like the idea of the station being in a more visible location, to fortify Middletown's perception as a transportation hub, along with HIA and the nearby Pennsylvania Turnpike. We can't wait for the chain-link fence to come down. We look forward to Emaus Street extending all the way to West Main Street, giving motorists another easy route to local businesses.

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We look forward to the development of Emaus Street between Wood and Union streets. Eventually, someone will buy the Elks Theatre, which could lead to more significant changes around Middletown Borough Hall. Middletown Borough Council late last year applied for a state grant to fund \$704,200 in proposed improvements to West Emaus Street, which would upgrade lighting, curbs and sidewalks, and trees and extend features of the streetscape improvements. PennDOT is expected to announce grant awards in July.

And let's not forget the entire reason behind this change. The new station will be much more friendly for those with disabilities.

What will our reaction be once everything is in place? It probably will be reminiscent of how then-Council President Diana McGlone reacted to the December 2010 announcement of the new location.

"I just want to say two words: 'Wooo! Woooooo!' " she said, hooting like a train whistle in celebration.

The opening of the station can't come too soon. We've been patient for long enough.

*source: [www.pressandjournal.com](http://www.pressandjournal.com)*