



Open house attendees at Harrisburg Transportation Center get chance for time travel

By Nora Shelly
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Plans to renovate the Transportation Center are on track to begin before the other proposed redevelopment. They include putting in more seating in the concourse area, upgrading office space upstairs, adding in a cafe in the lobby and a restaurant to the building. (PennDOT)

Plans to redevelop the Harrisburg Transportation Center and the area around it proved largely popular Thursday with community members and leaders.

At an open house at the Transportation Center -- which includes the train station and a bus depot -- people were able to view and give feedback on the proposals, which are focused on transit-oriented development in and around the station.

One part of the two-fold project is to redevelop the area around Paxton Creek and the waterbed itself. The proposal includes reducing flooding by changing the creek so it flows more naturally and putting in park land surrounding it. That part of the plan got a lot of attention at Thursday's open house, which was attended by about two dozen stakeholders, local business owners and residents.

Angela Watson, project manager for PennDOT, said while the master plans are complete, they are still taking feedback online and will continue to do so as the project moves forward.

Mayor Eric Papenfuse said Thursday that changes to the creek will help revitalize the industrial area around it.

"From a city standpoint, we've had people look along this industrial corridor, this old industrial corridor all the way along Cameron Street into the city, and people aren't going to invest and put millions of dollars in investment into an area which constantly floods," he said. "It's just a fact."

Watson said work on Paxton Creek will take place before other changes to the area surrounding the Transportation Center. PennDOT is currently undergoing a feasibility study for the project, she said. PennDOT is leading the project, but Harrisburg and other state agencies are involved and will be helping with securing grants and funding for the different stages, she added.

David Morrison, executive director of the Historic Harrisburg Association, said while the flood control and redevelopment plans for Paxton Creek might affect some nearby buildings, the overall changes to it will be a benefit to the city.

"The greenway itself is a wonderful idea. What it overall is going to do is really make that whole part of Cameron Street more attractive and better connected to center city," he said.

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The project also includes measures to upgrade the building's roof and skylights, make the bathrooms accessible and improve safety facilities in the station.

Bill Cologie, who owns Transit News, the shop inside the Transportation Center, said while he is concerned the proposed changes to the station will affect his business, he feels the upgrades are needed. Cologie said he and his employees often have to help people navigate the area and figure out where to park.

"We answer questions all day long, giving people directions," he said. "Signage would be a major concern for me, just to be helpful to the traveling folks."

Beyond the direct changes to the station, the plans also include proposed changes to the streetscape surrounding the station, including putting in bike and walking paths along Paxton Creek, relocating the bus depot and putting in safety improvements on Market and Cameron streets.

On Cameron Street, PennDot's plans include putting a "safety strip," or an area where the center lanes would move thru traffic, while slower-moving or turning vehicles would use the outside lanes. A focus of the project is to work on connecting the downtown with Allison Hill.

"Folks understand that this area is an area which right now is sort of barren, underutilized space between a vibrant downtown and vibrant neighborhoods," Papenfuse said. "The question is how do we connect them."

Papenfuse said he is hopeful the project will attract more people to move into Harrisburg. Bradley Jones, president of the development firm Harristown Enterprises, said while the station renovations should help improve commuters' experience, redevelopment there will fuel economic development opportunities in the surrounding area.

"We consider this facility to be a tremendous asset for the downtown," he said. "The great thing about this train station is its really walkable to the rest of the downtown."

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