

Paoli rail station getting \$72M-plus overhaul

Daniel Block, Staff Writer

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(Jeff Fusco/For the Inquirer)Paoli Train Station on May 1, 2015

The makeover might be decades overdue, and it is getting a huge boost from federal money.

But the major impetus for the massive overhauling of the 63-year-old Paoli train station, which serves about a million SEPTA and Amtrak riders annually, was a lawsuit filed by advocates for the disabled over its lack of accessibility.

"You wish you didn't have to have a lawsuit," said Marilyn Jamison, an Amtrak official who attended an open house at the station Wednesday during the peak late-day commute, "but in an environment where you're juggling funding, it helps get us all together."

Tents were set up on either side of the station as Jamison and about 15 other SEPTA, Amtrak, and government officials convened to celebrate the impending construction and to alert riders about what was coming.

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When all of the work is completed, the project's backers hope it not only will improve accessibility but reduce traffic in a heavily congested area and even help spur local economic development.

The three-part project is due to begin sometime this summer. During the first phase - to be completed by the end of 2018 - the station will be equipped with a new high-level platform, elevators, ramps, and a pedestrian overpass.

In Phase II, the Darby Road bridge over the tracks will be replaced and realigned, and in the final phase, the station will be expanded, and a high-level platform on the outbound side and a 600-space parking garage will be added.

The first two phases - completion dates undetermined - will cost \$71.2 million; the price tag for Phase III has not been determined, officials said, nor has the source of the money. Federal money will cover a significant portion of the costs.

The prime mover for the overhaul was an Americans With Disabilities Act lawsuit filed against Amtrak in 2012 by the group Disability Rights Pennsylvania (DRP).

At the time, the station had no wheelchair lift, and it still lacks easy access for those in wheelchairs to cross over to the other side of the tracks.

"The Paoli station was what Amtrak called a blocked station," said Kenneth Shiotani, a senior staff attorney at the Disability Rights Network, of which the DRP is an affiliate. "They wouldn't sell anybody a ticket if you said you were someone with a mobility impairment."

The Paoli station was only one of many Amtrak stations that were out of compliance with the ADA.

In the case of Paoli, the DRP sued on behalf of several train passengers who had disabilities. Amtrak settled with the organization in 2014, agreeing to bring the station into ADA compliance by the end of 2018.

But the origins of the project are older and broader.

"This has been decades we've been talking about a new Paoli station," said Sen. Andy Dinniman (D., Chester).

Paoli is one of five stations along SEPTA's Paoli-Thorndale line getting a spruce-up. A \$23.4 million update to the Exton station is already underway, and Downingtown, Coatesville, and Parkesburg also are in line for upgrades.

Officials believe the construction work won't have much impact on traffic near the station.

But "whatever impact there is," Dinniman said, "it's worth it for the end result."

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