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## Effort to reactivate Newtown rail line dominates discussion at Town Hall meeting

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By Jeff Werner; **BucksLocalNews.com** Editor

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UPDATE: Look for SEPTA'S RESPONSE in the coming days.

The effort to restore the Newtown rail line is picking up steam.

During a town hall meeting on Sunday at George School, more than 60 people listened and asked questions as representatives from the Pennsylvania Transit Expansion Coalition (PA-Tec) outlined its arguments for bringing back the line.

The meeting was organized by Newtown 21st Century Voice to give the residents of Newtown Borough and Newtown Township an opportunity to speak up on issues that could impact their lives.

During Sunday's Town Hall, comment was limited to the R8 line and the idea of establishing a community center. But organizers said they hope to hold additional town halls in the future.

Much of the discussion on Sunday centered on the potential restoration of the R8 line, which once linked Fox Chase with Newtown Borough via Village Shires, Churchville, Holland and Southampton in Bucks County and Abington and Cheltenham Township in Montgomery County. Operation on the line was discontinued in 1983 due to a lack of ridership and its reliance on diesel locomotives.

Since then, PA-Tec argues there's been a tremendous amount growth throughout the corridor, more than warranting the restoration of service.

The organization began pushing the R8 issue as an alternate to the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority's (SEPTA) plans to build a large parking garage in Jenkintown. They believe the transit organization should instead be investing in its commuter rail system, which they said would take cars off the road and be better for the environment.

The group is lobbying the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA) and legislators in Montgomery and Bucks counties for reinstatement of the line, either as the R8 Newtown-Fox Chase line or linked into the R4 line. The line would be electrified and equipped with welded rails and low profile electrical towers to make it aesthetically unobtrusive and as quiet as possible.

The non-profit, volunteer organization based in Southampton contends the line would draw new passengers, help the environment and ease congestion by taking cars off the road, while lessening the burden on nearby stations.

"Can we really afford to continue to let trees grow on this line, while we sit in traffic and compromise the environment and our

productivity?" they asked.

"Over and over again we have been told that this line is simply not feasible; that studies show only a modest benefit and not enough to justify a new line," said PA-Tec member John Scott.

That's not the case, he said, projecting the new line would draw from a large area of Bucks County -- as far away as Buckingham, Wrightstown and Upper Makefield -- in addition to highly populated Newtown Township, Southampton and Northampton townships.

"When you add up all those riders, we have a net gain of 3,000, which is significantly more than any study in the past has shown and probably enough to justify restoration of the line, if not make it an absolute necessity," said Scott.

With that said, Scott said it would take political backing and somewhere between \$100- and \$300-million to accomplish the mission.

"This is not a trivial project, but at the same time it is not a gigantic project. This is not a big dig," said Scott. "The funding would most likely come from SEPTA's capital budget."

SEPTA, however, hasn't been receptive to funding improvements and expansion of its rail system, preferring instead to put its money into building parking garages and investing into "smart station" technology initiatives, said Scott.

"Technology and parking garages have no place as a centerpiece for transit growth strategies," argues Scott. "Parking garages do not serve the people of Newtown well. Parking garages do not serve the environment well. Technology does not move passengers. Technology does not get a single car off the Newtown Bypass in the morning.

"The answer is much simpler," said Scott. "Instead of technology and garages being the centerpiece of the growth, the region, the environment and the economy need only two things - jobs and cold, steel rails."

Tom McHugh, who lives within a five minute walk of the Jenkintown station, is among hundreds of people fighting plans by SEPTA to build a parking garage at the station and has formed an alliance with PA-Tec to press instead for the reinstatement of the R8 line.

"We realized early on that the two projects -- parking garages and the expansion of rail - are mortal enemies. Only one will win. Our hope is that we can guide SEPTA strategy to think in terms of expanding rail because there is no form of transportation that comes close to steel wheels rolling on steel rails. Nothing comes close."

SEPTA, said McHugh, has had a tendency over time to contract itself into a small group of transit centers and starving and eventually eliminating their rail system. "The more I looked into it the more concern I had.

"Our sustainability depends on us getting out of automobiles as much as possible and as quickly as is practical," he said.

Newtown resident Allen Samuels said the rail line is a great idea, but he wondered where the cars would park.

Scott said he anticipates the establishment of a park and ride lot located off the Newtown Bypass in Newtown Township. Two acres have been zoned for that purpose, he said.

"There also may be a benefit of having a smaller station in the borough, which would primarily serve walkers and local residents," he said.

Another resident asked whether there is still opposition in the Beth Ayres area.

"There is potentially some opposition in that area," said Soctt. "That's why we have the R8 and R4 alternative. There are also environmental issues between Beth Ayres and Fox Chase and there's also a trail occupying the right-of-way," he said. "For various environmental and political reasons, that section may not be available."

Another resident asked if they had a case for making the R8 a priority over Quakertown, Reading and West Chester projects.

"We have looked at all of these. We'd just point out that some of the traffic corridors in Bucks County have double the amount of traffic others do. We have higher population densities in this part of Bucks County. Quakertown has had a lot of growth, but they still don't have the population density. The area served has 60 percent of the population that Newtown has. There's a stronger case for the Newtown line and they need to revisit that. There are clearly more people here."

The \$64,000 question is "how do we convince our friends at SEPTA that this is a worthwhile project ... and get them to understand that they need to switch into an expansion mode, which every other transit system in the country is doing," asked resident Dennis Goran.

Scott encouraged residents to write their county commissioners, local politicians, state representatives and state senators in support of the project.

"We can also look to the federal level to help get some of the funding in place, because we are talking about a lot of money," said Scott. "We have been in touch with many of the legislators and for the most part we get a lot of support. But I would encourage you to let them know that you're behind this, that we have a market here, that there is ridership here and it is not a wasteful project."

"I believe the tide is turning. They (SEPTA) are starting to see this is something they can't ignore much longer," said Scott. "They're kind of digging their heels in right now, but we think that's temporary."

SEPTA has basically said if the politics are behind this, they will build it, added PA-Tec vice president Paul Iverson. "If it's politically popular, they'll build it."

State Rep. Steve Santarsiero reiterated his support for the project, and again called for SEPTA to conduct a feasibility study. "And it needs to be a real feasibility study, based on real data and sound methodology," he said.

"This is a well thought out proposal that deserves a feasibility study, but as part of the mix we have to look at future transportation needs. We have to look at all the possibilities. They are not mutually exclusive and there are a number of ways we can improve our commutes and the quality of life in our area."

"While that's important, we also need to look at other potential solutions to the traffic problems we have and they are not mutually exclusive," said Santarsiero. "One idea I had when gas prices were hovering around \$4 was to introduce long range commuter buses to our area. The idea with that is to set up park and rides and we could have commuter buses going to major train terminals such as Cornwells Heights and the Hamilton station in New Jersey."

"SEPTA was not interested in that when I pitched it to them a year ago, but that doesn't mean private carriers won't be interested in it," he said. "The Bucks County TMA said they may be interested in looking at that on a pilot basis from the Taylorsville Road Park and Ride to the Hamilton Station. If we could start with that, that would help many of our commuters going north, particularly with the expansion of the Scudder Falls bridge."

In December, the group picked up support from the Newtown Township Board of Supervisors, which voted unanimously to adopt a resolution in support of the effort.

This spring, the group will make its presentation to the Newtown Borough Council, which will entertain a similar resolution.

The township's resolution calls on the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT), the Bucks County Planning Commission, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission and the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) to review the reinstatement of regional rail service between Fox Chase and Newtown.

"The restoration will afford Newtown Township residents with an easy and efficient means of transportation to and from Center City Philadelphia," reads the resolution.

It continues, "Exceptionally high growth rates of housing developments in areas of Bucks and Montgomery counties, formerly serviced by the R8 line north of Fox Chase, has contributed to traffic and congestion in the Newtown area. Sound planning principles indicate the growing need to expand the use of commuter rail systems to improve mobility and traffic flow."

The supervisors, in adopting the resolution, said they would "support a cooperative effort with other municipalities, Bucks and Montgomery counties and the business community for SEPTA, PennDOT and the Bucks County Planning Commission to conduct a new review of the reinstatement of regional rail service on the existing line."

Rob Ciervo, the chairman of the board of supervisors and a candidate for state representative in the 31st District, said the resolution would be sent to the agencies and governing bodies involved.

"We're not just saying we want the line to come back," said Ciervo. "We want these agencies to devote resources to do the study necessary. If a study is updated and done perhaps funding that would have gone to something else would go to this."

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