

Janet Benton
118 Webster Avenue
Wyncote, PA 19095
215-887-2285
bentoneditorial@msn.com

for April 6 presentation to community members and SEPTA

My name is Janet Benton, and my intent is to fill out your picture of those who live in this area and of our concerns about quality of life.

SEPTA by definition is not about a place. It is about transporting people from place to place. Thus it calls its constituents “riders,” not “residents.” In fact, however, we are both. And SEPTA’s foray into building garages in residential neighborhoods is pitting it against those who are most dedicated to being its riders—those who choose to reside near train stations. It seems clear that SEPTA, along with the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission and other planning groups, doesn’t consider the loyalties and love that people feel for their neighborhoods and the knowledge they have to be invaluable aids to draw upon for suitable, intelligent planning. Instead, they appear to view these as obstacles to so-called top-down planning and building. Because so many entities are failing to understand that change must suit and benefit the place where it’s going to occur, defending our neighborhoods against intrusive ideas falls to us residents, the ones who are the last to find out about their plans, often after plans have already been approved for funding, with our tax dollars, by people whose salaries we pay.

I live in the historic district of Wyncote. Most of us who live here do so because we care about the beautiful old homes, about our neighbors, and about maintaining what is distinctive about this place. A magic arises when one walks down a street filled with beautiful homes occupied continuously since the late eighteen or early nineteen hundreds. A parking structure the size of a city block, whether it holds 700 or 600 or 500 cars, whether it is fifty feet high or forty or thirty-five, is so out of scale, so inhumane in materials and scope, so vividly impersonal compared to this place we live in and love as to be a deep insult to us. Because to us, Wyncote is not a place to plop a monstrous heap of cement and invite hundreds more cars, buses, and shuttle vans to travel to. It is not just a train stop; and no, it is not a *future transit hub*. It is a precious historic neighborhood already threatened by too many cars and out-of-scale development within and around it.

Perhaps some of you are thinking, Oh, she’s only against this garage because it would be in *her* neighborhood. Maybe you’re using that acronym NIMBY, not in my backyard, to denigrate my deep concern for this place. If so, I’d like you to reconsider. Because concern for one’s own neighborhood is a noble instinct, a vital social urge to protect that motivates people to act. To the extent that people feel this urge and act on it, our neighborhoods remain livable. People who *don’t* care about their neighborhoods are as damaged and lost as people who don’t care about

their own children. If our politicians have lacked the ability to govern with this kind of care and have failed to protect us, and civic-minded people don't step up to protest development that threatens what is distinctive about the place we love, then **who will?**

Concerned citizens of Wyncote don't want the hammer-like force of top-down planning to harm this place, but that is not a selfish notion. Because when you harm people's connection to a place, you make them stop caring. You make them leave. You take from that place the people who create its literal value by giving themselves to it, and that place becomes empty of meaning. We all see places emptied of meaning every day. This region is filled with unloved places that are overrun with cars and built up out of human scale, with big-box malls and busy roads that dwarf local business districts. These places kill small businesses, property values, and healthy activities like walking, biking, and playing outdoors. They damage human health with many kinds of pollution and a lack of human connection. We don't want a garage as wide as 1½ football fields to move Wyncote closer to being that kind of a dead, lost place.

Becoming collateral damage is *not* in OUR plans—and it needn't be. Wyncote architects have shown options for pervious and streetside parking that could be added with little disruption, and others have suggested renting parking spaces in nearby lots or running shuttles from farther ones. These viable alternatives are far cheaper than a garage. In these and other ways, many of us would like to help create positive planning and development here that suits and supports Wyncote.

One of our practical concerns is property values. A garage planner asked some residents after a recent meeting whether having a parking garage within sight of one's home would *necessarily* decrease its value. So I'd like to ask all of you: When was the last time an enormous, freestanding parking garage inspired you to think, "Gee, I want to live close to this place"? "But I'll bet the property values are so high that I can't afford it. Because who doesn't want to live as close as possible to a PARKING GARAGE?" "This garage project is equity theft," a neighbor said. "It's worse than eminent domain, because at least with eminent domain you get *paid* for your loss."

Another concern is public health. Along with long-term increased air, noise, and water pollution from added vehicular traffic, and the glare of enormous, stadium-type lighting around the garage, we'd have 2 ½ years or more of living every day with the backup signals of massive construction vehicles, the noise and dust and toxic outpourings of huge-scale construction, and the constant running of air conditioners for half of each year instead of being able to open windows. Were construction to occur at night, we could also look forward to the effects of ongoing poor sleep, which include increased risks of developing heart disease, diabetes, and immune dysfunction.

All this to build a kind of structure known to provide a twenty-four-hour shelter for crime. Other presenters have covered this topic. Their evidence shows that there's a factual reason women's hearts pound when they walk to and from their car in a parking garage. Men I know don't feel

too safe in them, either. SEPTA points to planned features of higher ceilings, flat levels, and uniform lighting as increasing the perception of safety. But we don't want to perceive safety. We want to be safe. The planned closed-circuit TV on stairs and in elevators will be a wonderful way to get grainy, soft-focus portraits of crimes for posterity, but it is not a way to stop a crime when it's happening, and it usually doesn't even provide clear enough footage to aid in identifying criminals. With SEPTA's February 24 proposal to have one person staffing the garage when it's open and to use automated ticket and entry/exit areas, a commuter in trouble would have nothing more than a prayer to rely on.

Another concern discussed tonight is maintenance. You've gotten a tiny sample of what's abundantly evident at most stations, even ones that have just opened. Because though our transit authority's major projects are funded by the public, maintenance must come from SEPTA's own revenue. Clearly, they are focused more on ridership than on stewardship.

For SEPTA, this garage project is not about stewardship of any place, or public health, or safety. It is about meeting parking demand until 2030, as it was projected by seriously flawed studies years ago. Please note that this would mean that as of 2030, a mere 17 years after proposed completion, the taxpayer-funded 25 million dollar parking garage would not meet anticipated parking needs. **Then what?** Perhaps by then wiser minds will take the more sustainable approach of improving service and parking at other stations, improving bike and pedestrian access, offering shuttles from existing lots and apartment complexes, and creating a small amount of pervious-surface parking. But why can't that happen now?

Wyncote and Jenkintown are at the front line of resisting SEPTA's aim to erect huge parking structures in three of Cheltenham's residential neighborhoods. In 2013, it plans to build one at the Glenside station, and then, according to another regional planning document, one at Elkins Park. These plans were conceived as far back as the year 2000. So I'd like to know: Is encouraging more people to drive or making them drive farther to get on a train really SEPTA's best vision in 2009? SEPTA's own data shows that almost *all* its stations are near or at capacity parking-wise. In other words, where there is parking, people will park. But building more space for cars is a short-term, stop gap solution. *Isn't it time yet to think outside the box?*

The more we learn about plans for our area by various agencies, including proposed transit vans and parking shelters on narrow, winding roads and the township considering the bird sanctuary on Glenside Avenue to be land it can sell for residential development, the more we are forced to conclude that our officials and regional planning entities do not understand old Wyncote and its environs. They do not understand the promise of its history, or the wisdom and creative thinking that abound within this beautiful district. In my view, they are betraying both it and us.

President Obama sent me an email recently. Okay, a staffer sent it, and went to a list miles long. But the message, based on his first address to Congress, spoke to me. "Restoring our country's economic health," he wrote, "will only happen when ordinary citizens are given the opportunity

to hold their representatives fully accountable for the decisions they make.” I hope with all my heart that residents of Cheltenham will continue to do just as you request, Mr. President—to hold our representatives and decision makers in our township, at SEPTA, and at regional planning commissions fully accountable for the decisions they make and for how they spend taxpayers’ money. Representatives and decision makers, it’s not too late to shift your thinking and your plans, and to find solutions for train stations that are more sustainable, health-promoting, and intelligent than hulking garages. These products of outdated thinking will block the path to a better future for all our train stations. We don’t want our neighborhoods ruined by the last gasp of a bad idea.