

SEPTA's Regional Rail Policy is Bad Policy for Our Region

(Learn more at <http://www.cheltenhamchamberofcitizens.com>)

Cheltenham Chamber of Citizens (CCC), a nonprofit member-based organization, supports national energy and environmental policies for commuter transit with the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore, we strongly oppose SEPTA's plans for multi-story parking garages at the Jenkintown-Wyncote (J-W) and Glenside commuter rail stations. The essence of sound regional rail policy is to promote increased passenger miles, thereby reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT). SEPTA's policy, however, does the opposite.

Constructing large parking garages in mature, built-out inner suburbs, to house vehicles away from their home stations, results in more VMT throughout the region, increased levels of greenhouse gas emissions, and is not consistent with progressive public transportation, environmental and energy goals. Such a policy, of which the proposed garages at J-W and Glenside stations are a part, is a misappropriation of our tax revenue and will only further encourage rail riders to drive away from their local stations. It is imperative that our tax dollars be used for projects that will increase use of public transit – expanding rail lines and increasing commuter rail service at local stations.

The proposed parking expansion at J-W currently consists of a 700-space multi-story garage/station complex; however, there are plans to construct the facility to accommodate additional parking decks. At a minimum, 300-350 additional vehicles are expected to be driven to the J-W station by riders, who, instead of being offered the opportunity to commute or perhaps walk a much shorter distance to a station close to home, are forced to drive even further to a new J-W “hub.”

SEPTA has budgeted approximately \$53 million for the project: \$6M for planning; \$25-27M for the parking garage; and the remainder for access reconfiguration, including two 600 foot long, high-level platforms. Eighty percent of the budget will be funded through federal tax revenue, the remainder from state and local sources. This elaborate plan will net 300-350 additional parking spaces – at a cost of \$151,000 per new space added. The J-W station community is built-out and has not experienced growth for many years. We believe the \$53 million could and should be spent to expand the rail lines and improve access and service at all local stations, especially where the population has been growing: the outer suburbs.

Some important facts to consider:

- Regional population *and* rail ridership growth in the last 15 to 20 years has been concentrated in the distant suburbs.
- SEPTA has not sufficiently expanded parking and improved service at outlying stations serving this growth.
- SEPTA has closed many stations where riders could park or walk, forcing them to drive farther.
- To transport distant riders to the city a few minutes faster, many SEPTA rush hour trains now bypass several stations where there are empty parking spaces, again forcing more people to drive elsewhere.
- SEPTA claims the garage is needed to support high-level platforms; however, CCC has shown SEPTA how ADA-compliant platforms can be incorporated into the existing J-W station without a parking garage.

Currently, many rail riders drive from the far suburbs, such as Lansdale and Warminster, to the J-W Station through miles of dense, polluting, rush-hour traffic. The latest data show that nearly 80% of those currently parking at J-W drive away from their local stations because trains no longer stop frequently enough, the station has been closed, or there isn't enough local parking. SEPTA's present policy limits choices. If there were adequate parking and better service closer to home, those riders, as well as new riders, would be able to use a local station. Instead, SEPTA chooses to build a large parking garage, forcing even more people to funnel through very old two-lane roads that wind through historical residential areas.

The CCC supports regional rail as a way to take cars off ever-crowded streets, reduce air pollution and greenhouse gases, and lessen our dependence on imported non-renewable oil. However, each of these concerns will be exacerbated by SEPTA's current policy. New markets of ridership are not being captured, rather, SEPTA's outdated policy results in shifting existing riders from one ridershed to another. Using tens of millions of tax dollars to facilitate such is not a good use of our nation's infrastructure investments. SEPTA's policy is bad for our community and region and is being enabled by a flood of federal money. It is critical that those dollars be service-focused and in keeping with our national goals of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.