

Missing the train

By William Kenny
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My, how times have changed in Wissinoming.

In the 1800s, local resident Matthias W. Baldwin built the most famous and prolific locomotive manufacturing company in the world. But soon, folks living in the shadow of his former estate won't even be able to catch a train in their own neighborhood.

Facing a \$41 million operating deficit in fiscal year 2004, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority last month announced plans to close the Wissinoming Station as one of many cost-cutting measures. The station is on Comly Street, between Tacony and Keystone streets, and serves the R7 Trenton Line.

The shutdown is scheduled for September. Some community leaders and elected officials are trying to block it, fearing that the closure will further erode the identity of a proud but threatened community.

"We kind of feel like, gradually, services are being removed from the neighborhood by the state. What's next? The post office?" said Debbie Darroyo, president of the Wissinoming Civic Association.

Recently, the civic leader said, state officials closed Wissinoming's lone state-operated Wine and Spirits Shoppe. The neighborhood, which is known for its multitude of churches and cemeteries, doesn't have a library or a bank, either, she added.

Though SEPTA's board of directors is directly responsible for approving the Wissinoming closure, state government can bear a share of the blame, too, according to Darroyo, because Gov. Edward G. Rendell cut funding for SEPTA by \$15 million in his budget, which passed the legislature earlier this year.

The cut raised SEPTA's projected deficit from \$40 million to \$55 million. In June, however, the authority's board passed \$14 million in cost reductions, including the station closure.

"It's not like we can't survive without a liquor store or a train station," Darroyo said. "But it's like, 'Does the state not care about our neighborhood?'"

The next closest R7 stations are Tacony, about 10 blocks to the north, and Bridesburg, about eight blocks to the south. Other local mass transit options include the Route 56 bus on Torresdale Avenue, about six blocks away.

"(Wissinoming Station) provides a critically needed transportation hub for people who may not be physically able to walk to Torresdale Avenue to catch the fifty-six bus," said state Rep. Michael McGeehan (D-173rd dist.), who is trying to secure state funding to preserve the stop.

Two other stations were ticketed for closure, too.

Lamokin Street, on the R2 Wilmington Line near Chester, shut down on July 1. Angora, on the R3 Media Line in West Philadelphia, is expected to close in about six months, said Jim Whitaker, a SEPTA spokesman.

The transportation authority blamed poor ridership at those locations for their closures. The Wissinoming Station sees only about 20 riders per day, on average, Whitaker confirmed. Generally, SEPTA requires 50 riders per day to maintain regional rail stations.

Former Wissinoming Civic president Glenn Devitt thinks that SEPTA could have done more to increase ridership at the station instead of shutting it down. Devitt, now the president of United Northeast Neighbors, has a unique perspective: He worked for SEPTA for 24 years, most recently as a project manager in the maintenance training department.

"They were going to close it down eight years ago. That's when I was working for SEPTA," said Devitt, who lobbied leadership of the authority to remove the station from the list of cuts.

"They took it off, but what they slowly did was, every time they changed the schedule, they removed one more (scheduled) stop."

Soon, with declining ridership, the station was converted into a "flag" stop, meaning the train wouldn't stop at all unless the engineer saw riders waiting on the platform.

"They designed it that way," Devitt said. "It's like having a business. If you're open only one hour a day, you're not going to get much business. They've done nothing to improve business there."

He argues that SEPTA would be better off financially by trying to promote more ridership instead of cutting service.

"That's the way SEPTA has always been — penny-wise and dollar-foolish," Devitt said.

Whitaker said SEPTA has tried to attract more riders through advertising campaigns, but business in Wissinoming hasn't improved.

Though unimpressive visually, the station has a historical air about it, according to some. It dates to the 1870s, when it became a stop on the Trenton-Philadelphia Railroad, which was a key link in the route between Philadelphia and New York City. The line ended in Kensington, where passengers would board boats to complete the voyage to present-day Center City.

The site is less than a block from the former location of the Baldwin mansion and was once an anchor of the neighborhood. (After the locomotive tycoon's death in the 1860s, the mansion served as a home for elderly women. It burned down in the 1950s.)

"Our whole neighborhood, Wissinoming, was created around that train station," Devitt said.

Today, the spot is little more than two brick shelters, one for each direction of travel, covered in thick layers upon layers of green paint. Weeds sprout through the cracks of the concrete platform.

A nearby tree is the site of a makeshift memorial to a local man killed on the tracks by an Amtrak train on March 25.

The station has a few stands of overhead lights, but they are easily outnumbered by the "No Trespassing" signs posted throughout the site. The only sign of recent upkeep at the site one day last week was a fresh trash bag tied to the exterior of a wastebasket on the southbound platform.

Whitaker, the SEPTA spokesman, did not know how much money the transit authority would save by closing the station.

In response to the closure announcement, however, McGeehan, the state representative, sponsored a House bill proposing to eliminate the SEPTA deficit by raising the state fees attached to new tire purchases and auto rentals.

The fee on new tires would go from \$1 to \$3, while the auto rental fee would go from \$2 to \$4. McGeehan figures the plan would generate \$50 million in annual revenue — enough to cover the SEPTA deficit, as well as deficits facing other transportation agencies across the state.

"I've introduced a bill to try to cover that funding gap," McGeehan said, "to prevent closures this year and provide another steady source of income for SEPTA."

The bill has been referred to a House committee. It is unlikely to come up for a vote before the fall.

Meanwhile, McGeehan and state Sen. Michael J. Stack (D-5th dist.), have lobbied the Rendell administration in recent weeks to restore some of the cut transportation funding to the budget. Last week, lawmakers continued to meet in Harrisburg to amend the Rendell budget, which featured sweeping funding cuts.

According to Beth Williams, a spokeswoman for House Speaker John Perzel (R-172nd dist.), the discussion has focused on restoring an education subsidy, expanding legal gambling, developing an economic stimulus package and tax reform.

Rendell spokesman Tom Hickey said that the governor would likely restore some of the cut transportation funding thanks to a recent increase in federal money allocated to the state. Pennsylvania will receive an additional \$900 million in federal money over the next two years, Hickey said. Rendell plans to spend half of it on a Medicaid subsidy, then filter the other half into other programs.

"The governor has said he intends to restore some of the toughest cuts made (in his budget)," Hickey said. However, Rendell "does not expect to see dollar-for-dollar restorations," the spokesman added.

Other beneficiaries of the additional funds could include libraries and substance-abuse assistance programs.

Interestingly, even if SEPTA makes up its \$41 million budget gap, it would not keep the station open, according to Whitaker. After all, the \$41 million figure is based on the approved service cuts being carried out.

"Basically, our board has approved the closures," Whitaker said. ••

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