

John Scott: Another Voice

Train to Newtown is the sustainable option

The Newtown Township Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution on Dec. 16 in support of restoring commuter rail service along SEPTA's R8 Newtown Line.

With three townships along the corridor calling for service and existing SEPTA stations unable to accommodate more riders, will our regional planners and elected officials recognize that transportation along this corridor is a problem?

Had the Newtown line been electrified in 1980 as planned, the cost would have been \$3 million. Now that cost has soared by a factor of 10.

The choices are: Extend rail service north of Fox Chase, which takes cars off the road, shortens commutes and makes communities walkable? Or build more parking lots at other stations and multilevel parking garages in Jenkintown, which SEPTA calls the sustainable option? Who are the taxpayers sustaining, SEPTA, or the region?

Newtown Township's resolution acknowledges that it cannot continue to remain without commuter rail service. To remain sustainable and provide its residents with easy access to regional jobs, the airport, the numerous universities accessible by train, the convention center, and Amtrak, the R8 must be extended back to Newtown Township. Newtown Township is the place to build parking garages, since population growth has been well over 200 percent since 1990, while Jenkintown's growth has remained flat.

At the same time, Newtown is pressing for train service, Jenkintown-Wyncote is asking SEPTA not to turn their small neighborhood into a large transit hub. Because of increasing ridership, more commuters are choosing Jenkintown station to reach the train because of convenience and parking accessibility. SEPTA wants to increase parking at this station with parking garages. While the cost of these garages is less than restoring train service to Newtown, studies have shown that the cost per parking spot at Jenkintown is much higher than the cost per rider on the R8. SEPTA's cost-benefit analysis does not include abstract costs such as pollution, increased rider miles, and lost productivity. SEPTA acknowledges that there is not enough service, or the service does not reach the communities that it needs through the planning of these parking facilities.

Parking garages in Jenkintown means SEPTA collects lower fares, and must haul around empty cars for more miles to accommodate the additional riders at Jenkintown while commuters spend more time in their cars. These garages will also mean more traffic on small two-lane residential streets.

Yet, the proposed Newtown Township park-and-ride station, located on the four-lane 413 bypass, connected to I-95, is considered unattainable for the next 30 years by DVRPC and SEPTA planners.

While world leaders continue to

debate the effects of global climate change two things are certain: the environment is changing, and our supply of fossil fuels is finite. Nothing short of cold fusion will indefinitely support our happy motoring mentality.

The question before us is do we continue to support the automobile as the old guard, trusted and sole means of transportation in our suburban communities, and invest in projects that benefit only those who own and operate a car, which will soon exclude a growing segment of our aging population? Or do we diversify, and invest in existing infrastructure that gives us choices and better access to the assets of the region by extending train service on existing lines, as they were intended when built?

Consider these facts: Since SEPTA took over the railroad from Conrail in 1983, more than \$10 billion have been spent on system improvements. Not a nickel of that has resulted in an inch of new service on SEPTA owned railroad.

Over the next 10 years, SEPTA will spend \$1 billion on buses, \$200 million on parking lots, while PennDOT spends \$500 million per year on highway maintenance. The improvements to I-95 alone, which started almost 10 years ago, will cost almost \$6 billion dollars when complete. How much of our tax dollars for transportation are actually taking cars off the road, and making our commutes more efficient, and our communities more sustainable?

One final fact to consider: Since SEPTA has deemed the Newtown line unfundable for the next two generations, Montgomery County has leased 2.5 miles of the Newtown railroad from SEPTA, ripped up the tracks, and made a walking trail with only one entrance, and no exits, for a handful of their residents. The county

pocketed the \$205,000 when they sold the rails to a metal scrapper, and left the rest of us with a transit corridor that grows trees. Is this the future that our planners and legislators consider sustainable?

John Scott is director of Communications for the Pennsylvania Transit Expansion Coalition.



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