

## **Transit Everywhere**

### **PLANNING MAGAZINE**

**February 2007**

#### **Transit Everywhere**

Rail thrives in the Philadelphia area.

*By Joseph A. Slobodzian*

When it opened in 1930, Suburban Station was the flagship of the Pennsylvania Railroad. The 21-story, art deco jewel at the entrance to Center City Philadelphia's business district included four levels of concourses, platforms, service corridors, and a web of rails connecting commuters to the Main Line and western suburbs.

Last summer, after decades of neglect that turned it into a dirty, dank, and dangerous passageway for commuters, the black granite, rose marble, and bronze terminal was reborn following a nine-year, \$63 million makeover.

For the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority, successor to the bankrupt and defunct Pennsylvania Railroad, the makeover was more than just a commitment to improve a historic asset. It was also symbolic of Suburban Station's future expanded role as the commuter's main gateway to Center City.

Beginning in 2008, more than 2,000 workers will move into the Comcast Tower, a \$465 million, 57-story colossus now rising at 17th Street and John F. Kennedy Boulevard, across the street from Suburban Station's west facade.

Liberty Property Trust, owner and developer of the building that will become the cable giant's headquarters, selected the site for its tower specifically because of its access to public transportation. The project's centerpiece, says John Gattuso, Liberty Property's senior vice president and director of national and urban development, will be its public spaces, including a multistory glass "winter garden" that will feature shopping, dining, and a grand new entrance to the Suburban Station concourse.

#### **Old and new**

There is a lot more that's new at SEPTA, although spokesman Richard Maloney acknowledges that much of the \$400 million spent by the regional authority over the last decade has gone to infrastructure: rails and switches, overhead power lines, and other items that riders rarely notice, but that dramatically improve the safety and reliability of the daily commute.

SEPTA goes way back, Maloney notes. The Pennsylvania Railroad, which formed the framework of the commuter lines, dates from the 1840s, he says, not long after the invention of the steam engine. SEPTA itself is the nation's second oldest public transit system and the "largest multimodal transit system under one management in the United States," he adds.

It wasn't easy to get to that point. Created by the Pennsylvania legislature in 1964 to provide public transportation for the city of Philadelphia and Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery counties, the system inherited an amalgam of bankrupt or financially troubled private transportation companies.

At first, passengers rode in the old cars of the Pennsylvania Railroad, which terminated at Suburban Station, and the Reading Railroad, which mainly ran through the northern suburbs and came into Center City's Reading Terminal (its head house and train shed are now part of the Pennsylvania Convention Center). Light rail lines, bus and trolley lines, the Broad Street Subway, and the Market–Frankford Subway-Elevated Line were acquired from the old Philadelphia Transportation Company and several suburban companies.

In Philadelphia, as in most older cities, private companies built and operated public transit systems. For example, the Philadelphia Transportation Company ran a trolley line out to Willow Grove in Montgomery County and put an amusement park there to encourage development of its real estate; the park was one of John Philip Sousa's favorite concert stops.

Today, SEPTA's service area covers 2,200 square miles and includes 13 regional rail lines and 153 stations; two subway lines with 52 stations, nine light rail lines, and 126 bus routes. In the 2005 fiscal year, according to agency estimates, the system carried 299 million riders, with an average daily ridership of 88,288 on the fixed-route rail, bus, subway, and trolley services.

Until Suburban Station's renovation, SEPTA's largest project, carried out with the city of Philadelphia in 1984, was the Center City Commuter Tunnel, which made possible a link between the old Pennsy and Reading rail systems. For the first time, commuters did not have to walk three blocks to continue a rail trip from one part of the region to the other.

The project — which also created the Market East station, adjacent to the old Reading Terminal, and a connection to the Gallery shopping mall — is part of the legacy of Philadelphia's legendary city planner, Edmund Bacon, who died in 2005 at the age of 95.

The other major SEPTA project under way is a \$567 million renovation of the 99-year-old iron superstructure that carries subway-elevated trains above Market Street from 69th Street in West Philadelphia to 40th Street. From there the line goes underground through Center City, emerging at the river, where it is again elevated, and on to the new Frankford Transportation Center in Northeast Philadelphia.

The project, which has infuriated small business owners whose Market Street stores are underneath the el in West Philadelphia, is scheduled to be completed in 2008. It will include several stations with elevators to make them accessible to disabled people.

Maloney says 2008 will also see the arrival of 104 new Silverliner rail cars, which will replace about a third of the current fleet of regional rail cars, some of which are 40 years old and still carry the name Pennsylvania Railroad on their sides. SEPTA has already replaced its old subway cars with new air-conditioned vehicles, as it has its fleet of buses.

### **It's the money**

As is true of many mass transit agencies, SEPTA's biggest problem is money. By law, Maloney says, the agency must earn 50 percent of its revenue from fares; the rest comes from federal, state, and local subsidies. This year, that formula has resulted in a \$37 million deficit on a \$991 million spending plan.

There is hope for the long term: A report released in November, after a 16-month study by a Transportation Funding and Reform Commission created by Gov. Edward Rendell, recommends that a dedicated source of funding be created, to be drawn from state sales tax or income tax revenues and an increase in the state realty transfer tax. That could yield as much as \$1.3 billion for mass transportation throughout Pennsylvania.

But the recommendation has to be enacted, and until then SEPTA and other state transit authorities must continue limping along, trying to pare down a deficit they are legally not permitted to carry.

One huge expense for SEPTA, Maloney says, is bringing its aging infrastructure into compliance with the federal Americans With Disabilities Act. Each time a station is renovated or improved, it must be made ADA-compliant, which requires installing elevators to the platforms. "Elevators are a million dollars each," he notes. "And then you have to pay for maintenance."

A major current challenge for SEPTA architects and engineers is planning the renovation of the city hall station of the Broad Street subway. Built in the 1920s, the subway was literally dug below the sprawling French Second Empire municipal building with its 548-foot-high tower, one of the world's tallest all-masonry load-bearing structures.

Dank and often wet from an ancient spring that still runs under the city hall complex — once the site of Philadelphia's first public waterworks — the station is in dire need of an overhaul, including elevators. But figuring out how to do that, Maloney jokes, is "the nightmare that never ends."

## Thinking regionally

There are periodic talks of reviving light-rail service along abandoned cross-country trolley rights of way or rail freight lines in the Philadelphia area, including a line that would connect the mammoth King of Prussia Mall shopping complex in Montgomery County to Pottstown and then Reading. But problems reaching agreement with rail freight lines — and cost — have doomed those proposals for the near future. Even reviving one two-mile stretch of an unused SEPTA line to serve West Chester, the Chester County seat, would cost some \$51 million, Maloney says.

Local people often hold up New Jersey Transit's two-year-old River Line as a model. The \$600 million, light-rail line parallels the Delaware River from Trenton, the state capital, to Camden.

But Maloney notes that there's a major difference between the two areas. The construction of the River Line reflected a political commitment to earmark funding for mass transit, in part to encourage development in a string of old industrial cities in the 34 miles between Trenton and Camden, he says. He estimates that the state subsidy for the River Line is close to 80 percent. In contrast, SEPTA is required by law to recoup 50 percent of its operating costs from the fare box.

Earlier this year, New Jersey Transit officials pegged River Line average weekday ridership at 6,912, almost 1,000 more passengers than the year before. New Jersey pays \$7.77 per passenger to cover the line's operational costs, more than twice the subsidy given the agency's other light-rail operations in North Jersey.

The catch is that New Jerseyans also pay \$49 million a year in debt service for River Line operations. That's because federal transportation officials, discounting the need for the River Line, refused to fund the line's \$600 million construction costs.

Officials in the city of Reading in Berks County, about 60 miles northwest of Philadelphia, had their own dream of a new rail line, the Schuylkill Valley Metro, that would link the city's outlet stores with Philadelphia. But in August, Gov. Rendell declared the line dead because, once again, there would be no federal funding to help with the estimated \$1 to \$2 billion construction cost.

Maloney notes that SEPTA's existing regional rail lines have plenty of capacity for passengers. The problem is parking. "It's just impossible to find the land to create more station parking spaces," he says.

In Philadelphia's inner-ring suburbs — places like Glenside and Bryn Mawr — the land around the railroad stations was long ago developed for housing or commercial uses, or is prohibitively expensive to acquire. And in the outer suburbs, Maloney says, SEPTA is often faced with local resistance. In Delaware County, for instance, the agency had hoped to buy a strip of land adjacent to the Elwyn station, the final stop on the western leg of its R3 line. The proposal was defeated by residents' opposition to the creation of a large commuter parking lot.

### **Trolleys pro and con**

The jury is still out on the value of some recent SEPTA projects such as the use of the restored PCC trolley cars on the Route 15 line, which runs from West Philadelphia past the Philadelphia Zoo and on into Center City.

The historic buff-over-green cars were named for the Presidents' Conference Committee, convened in 1929 to discuss the future of the street railway industry, and they're a favorite of trolley buffs, partly because of their sleek, rounded, art deco styling. They evoke nostalgic memories among generations of older Philadelphians.

But trolleys, unlike buses, are stopped dead if an illegally parked or disabled vehicle is on the tracks. "Some people love them, but the question still remains if this is the most efficient way to move people," Maloney says.

There's no question that kids are attracted, as any visitor to SEPTA's Market Street museum can see. On a recent day, children edged each other to sit in the driver's seat of one of the classic PCC cars. "The kids love this place and sometimes the parents just can't get them to leave," laughs George Rice, 68, a retired SEPTA structural engineer who volunteers in the museum store.

Rice, of Havertown, is an avid model railroader who this year erected a holiday train layout with O-gauge Lionel trains and settings recalling Philadelphia area sites. "I grew up when there were trolley cars everywhere and when steam locomotives were still running," he says, recalling fondly the Pennsylvania Railroad's famous K-4 steam locomotives.

"Before I came to SEPTA, I had to drive to work in Cherry Hill," a post-World War II New Jersey suburb, Rice says. "It was a good move at the time but I missed taking the train. The traffic just got me too stressed out."

*Joe Slobodzian covers Center City Philadelphia as a reporter for the Philadelphia Inquirer.*

**Images:** Top — The Grand Hall of the Pennsylvania Convention Center, once a train shed of the Reading Railroad terminal, is the site of the opening reception at this year's APA national planning conference. Photo courtesy Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau/Jim McWilliams. Middle — SEPTA's Market East Station, which replaced the Reading Terminal in 1984, is connected to the Gallery shopping mall. Photo Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority. Bottom — Saving the Reading Terminal Headhouse was a mid-1990s preservation victory. It's now the entrance to the convention center. Photo Ruth Knack.

## Transit Gets a Boost

Transit in general, and transit-oriented development in particular, got a boost statewide two years ago when the commonwealth of Pennsylvania enacted the Transit Revitalization Investment District Act. Among other things, local and county governments, transit authorities (including Amtrak), and other transportation providers may use TRID to facilitate and implement TODs. The program is administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, working with the Department of Transportation. A planning study is required for TRID designation.

TRID boundaries coincide with a value capture area that enables the local jurisdictions and transit agency to share the tax revenues generated by real estate investment.

For fiscal year 2006, the General Assembly directed DCED to allocate up to \$500,000 from an existing planning program for TRID planning grants. Subsequently, eight projects (with a maximum grant of \$75,000 and a 25 percent match requirement) were approved; a ninth project was funded directly by PennDOT.

Five of the projects are located along SEPTA lines in southeastern Pennsylvania (two in Philadelphia and three in the suburbs).

Two of the suburban TRID projects, in the boroughs of Ambler (Montgomery County) and Marcus Hook (Delaware County), serve central business districts. A third, Croydon, in Bristol Township (Bucks County), serves a revitalizing industrial corridor.

One of the Philadelphia projects is a regional rail station serving Temple University and its health care complex. The second city project is an elevated station on the Market-Frankford subway-elevated line at 46th and Market streets in West Philadelphia.

*Richard G. Bickel, AICP*

*Bickel is the director of the planning division at the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, the metropolitan planning organization for the Philadelphia-Camden-Trenton region. He chairs the legislative committee of the APA's Pennsylvania chapter.*