



# Route selection a major step forward for KOP rail

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by Jason Laughlin and Laura McCrystal

SEPTA on Friday unveiled its preferred plan to extend regional rail service to King of Prussia: an elevated spur that would run four to five miles, mainly along the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

With an estimated pricetag of \$1.1 billion, the spur off the Norristown High Speed Line could be operational by 2023, officials said. It would carry 8,500 passengers daily to five stops, including one inside the King of Prussia Mall.

The goal is loftier: to finally connect Philadelphia via rail to a business and commercial hub among the largest of its kind in the country.

"It really minimizes the impact to residential areas," said Liz Smith, SEPTA's manager of long-range planning, "while providing maximum impact for development and jobs."

Friday's announcement marked a major step for the project, which has been in early phases for years. But the plan, chosen from among five proposals, still faces major road bumps.

Both opponents and supporters of the project said Friday that the chosen plan is the best of those considered - especially compared to an unpopular option to build a rail line along Route 202.

Still, some voiced concerns.

"I think a lot of people just find it insulting in our community that it's solely benefitting the businesses," said Dan Cowhey, a resident of the Valley Forge Homes neighborhood, where the rail line would pass yards away from some homes. "It's going to disrupt our lives."

The proposed 17-foot-high rail spur would include five stops: one at Henderson Road, with vehicle parking; two at the King of Prussia Mall, including a stop that deposits passengers in the mall itself; and two more in the King of Prussia Business Park, an old commercial and industrial site poised for mixed-use redevelopment.

The plan will meet its first test March 7, at a hearing designed to acquaint the public with it and solicit reaction.

Keen to avoid criticism that residents haven't been given enough notification about the project, SEPTA this week mailed an introduction to the plan to 30,000 addresses in Upper Merion Township.

Cowhey and his neighbors have collected 500 petition signatures asking SEPTA to allow Upper Merion residents a vote on the plan.

"The residents of the township come first," said Greg Waks, vice president of the Upper Merion Township board of supervisors. "Most people also know that one of the reasons why we have the lowest taxes in the area as well as a very high rate of services is because we have a strong local business community. So it's not so cut-and-dry."

The supervisors have not taken an official position. Waks said he was happy to see that the widely unpopular proposal for a rail line along Route 202 had been abandoned, and said the current plan is "worth exploration."

Upper Merion is among the most productive townships in the five-county region in job creation, and a recent report from the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia touted the potential benefits of rail to the community's robust retail business sector.

Over 20 years, the study projected, rail service could bring \$540 million to \$946 million in real estate value and 1,000 or more jobs annually, up to 29,000 new King of Prussia employees. The rail project also eventually could save drivers 1.7 million to 2.1 million hours per year now spent on congested roads.

"If this can get done it will be a real game changer for our region," said Montgomery County Commissioner Valerie Arkoosh.

Eric Goldstein, executive director of the King of Prussia Business Improvement District, praised the preferred route and stop locations as the best options for attracting economic development, especially at the King of Prussia Business Park, now host to 20,000 employees.

"We have to make these investments in public transportation if we are going to be a viable region, nationally, going forward," Goldstein said.

SEPTA plans to seek New Starts grant money in 2018 from the Federal Transportation Administration to pay for half of the \$1.1 billion cost. It is working with area consultants and stakeholders to find sources for the rest.

"I think it's great," said Rob Henry, executive director for Greater Valley Forge Transportation Management Association and one of the people who pushed for SEPTA to consider adding a spur about four years ago. "I think it's the one that will have the most impact from an economic perspective."

Many steps still lie ahead before the rail spur can become a reality. Comments from three March hearings could result in changes to the plan that will be incorporated into a draft environmental impact statement, expected to be finished in December. That will also be opened for public comment.

The final environmental impact statement must be approved by the FTA as well as SEPTA's board, the Montgomery County commissioners, the Upper Merion board of supervisors, and the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission.

The project is among SEPTA's most ambitious.

"This is pure, new infrastructure," said Byron Comati, SEPTA's director of strategic planning. "This is breaking new ground."

