

Stakeholders recommend one rail extension route for Norristown High Speed Line

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UPPER MERION >> SEPTA and more than a half-dozen stakeholders have recommended the “PECO, Turnpike, First Avenue” route alternative to extend the Norristown High Speed Line into Upper Merion.

The route recommendation, chosen from five alternative final routes, will be described at three public meetings in early March in Upper Merion and Norristown.

Over the last two years the alternative routes were presented to Upper Merion residents and officials at public comment meetings. Those route alternatives were winnowed down from an initial set of 16 alternative routes.

“The recommendation was based on weighing the benefits and impacts of each alternative,” said Elizabeth Smith, the manager of long-range planning at SEPTA. “We weighed what we heard from the public during many meetings. We also heard from Route 202 business people and residents that it (an alternative route using Route 202) would have too much impact on the community and make it feel too urbanized.”

The recommended “locally preferred alternative” (LPA) would branch off the existing, high-speed line and follow the PECO right-of-way for high-tension power lines and then the Pennsylvania Turnpike into Upper Merion. It would loop around the back parking lot of the King of Prussia Mall and follow First Avenue to the area of North Gulph Road.

“The recommended route is good because in comparing it to the other alternative routes it had a lesser impact on the residents,” Smith said. “It provides a benefit because we are proposing a park-and-ride parking lot at Henderson Road. That is toward the beginning of the route into Upper Merion.”

Two of the four routes would have used Route 202 either with an elevated, concrete rail bed or an at-grade rail installation between the opposing traffic lanes. One route alternative followed the PECO right of way directly into the mall area. The final alternative provided a different route past the King of Prussia Mall into the business park.

Smith said the First Avenue part of the preferred route provided the “best access to the business park and the most potential for future redevelopment.”

A group of stakeholders, including SEPTA, Upper Merion township, Montgomery County, the KOP-BID, the Greater Valley Forge Transportation Management Association and the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, met in September 2015 and endorsed the preferred route, said Byron Comati, the director of strategic planning and analysis for SEPTA.

“This is a recommendation. It is not a full, binding decision. We have a long time before a final decision is made,” said Comati. “This is an early action on what the recommended alignment should be.”

The first public meeting will be held from 4 to 8 p.m., Monday, March 7, at the Radisson Hotel Valley Forge in Upper Merion. A presentation of the preferred route will be made at 6 p.m.

The second meeting will be held from 4 to 8 p.m., Wednesday, March 9, at the Norristown municipal hall in Norristown. The presentation will be at 6 p.m.

The third meeting will be held from 2 to 8 p.m., Tuesday, March 15, at the DoubleTree by Hilton Valley Forge Hotel in Upper Merion. Presentations will be made at 3 and 6 p.m.

Opposition to the concept of extending the regional rail line has appeared online this winter.

A [change.org](https://www.change.org) online petition called, “No Septa high speed train line in Upper Merion Township” had 500 signatures on Friday morning.

The petition complained many of the Upper Merion stops will not have parking lots, it will run 21 hours each day, that proposed elevated sections of the train route would be built near ranch-style homes and SEPTA has been vague about how the estimated \$1 billion construction costs would be funded.

“Upper Merion residents were not asked if they even want the project to happen,” the petition said. “At the very least, we feel residents of Upper Merion should vote on the extension of the Norristown High Speed Line.”

Smith responded that “the goal of the planning process is to hear from the public.

We are hoping people will attend the next meetings and we will utilize those (change.org) comments moving forward.”

In December 2015 the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia (ELGP) and 16 stakeholders unveiled a study touting the economic virtues of the rail extension. The KOP Rail Coalition posted the 38-page study at www.connectKOP.com, and SEPTA regularly updates www.kingofprussiarail.com on the progress of the long-range planning process. #KOPRail is the hashtag created by ELGP to advocate for the transit project.

“It is exciting to be at this stage in what has been a transparent and data-driven planning process,” said Montgomery County Vice Chairman Val Arkoosh in an email. “The need for KOPRail is very important to the county’s continued solid economic growth.”

The King of Prussia District (KOP-BID) endorsed the PECO/Turnpike/FirstAvenue route alternative at www.connectKOP.com.

“This critical infrastructure investment will provide a much needed alternate mode of travel,” said Eric Goldstein, the executive director of the KOP-BID, “to the largest employment and commercial center in the suburban Philadelphia region.”