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THE LONGEST RIDE

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Ear buds in, Teresa Hite sang, her voice just audible over the growling engine of the bus.

Two seats back, Carl Burch, dressed for work in a T-Mobile shirt, reclined and closed his eyes.

On a bench behind Burch, Zoe Tanner read Matthew 2:14 from a Bible open on her lap.

Each morning they take the Route 125 bus 26 miles from Philadelphia to jobs in King of Prussia. On a good day it's an hour ride. When traffic is bad, it takes much longer.

A proposed rail spur to link the city to the commercial hub of King of Prussia could help. Some property owners along the proposed route have objected to the project, but advocates say it would reduce road congestion and serve the King of Prussia Business Park, which is poised to boom with dense, mixed-use development.

If the \$1.1 billion project becomes a reality, it will also be built with the 125's riders in mind. Every work day more than 3,500 people use two bus routes that travel from Center City to King of Prussia, SEPTA reported. Another bus from the 69th Street Transportation Center in Upper Darby takes about 1,100 to the same destination. Each day, 43,000 come from outside Upper Merion to work in King of Prussia, and about 6,400 of them are from the city, according to 2014 census data.

"If there's a way to commute to King of Prussia quickly I'd be all for it," said Burch, 48.

The proposed rail spur to the Norristown High Speed Line would not be a cure-all. It would depart from the 69th Street Transportation Center, so many travelers would still have to take a 17-minute subway from 13th and Market Streets to catch their train. Going from 69th Street to the King of Prussia Mall by rail would take about 35 minutes, officials said. There is the possibility of 22-minute express service, though, from 69th Street to the King of Prussia Mall. For people who don't have monthly passes, the rail would cost slightly more than the bus, by today's fees.

The spur, which, if built, would open in 2023, promises two big benefits: reliability and a way around Schuylkill Expressway traffic.

"There's no consistency or expectation you're going to get there [on time] by bus," said Liz Smith, SEPTA's manager for long-term planning.

Better commutes, experts said, improve economic and physical health.

"Longer commutes are associated with less happiness, more stress, higher divorce rates, less sleep," said Erick Guerra, a University of Pennsylvania assistant professor of urban planning.

A 2015 report by the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia found that Philadelphia's poorest neighborhoods have the longest commutes. Some of those neighborhoods also have predominantly African American populations. The Economy League analyzed data on commuters and race and found that African Americans have the city's longest commute, on average: 33.1 minutes.

People with longer commutes tend to have less upward economic mobility, said Nick Frontino, the report's author. Meanwhile, businesses with good transit access tend to have lower employee turnover.

While a commute from 13th Street to King of Prussia on the proposed rail would be only 15 minutes shorter, at best, than a bus, he said, it would be more reliable. The buses from Center City to King of Prussia run on schedule only about 75 percent of the time.

"If you have an hour-and-a-half commute and it's predictably an hour-and-a-half, maybe that's better," Frontino said.

The 125 bus departs from 13th and Market Streets. For many of its passengers, getting there is a commute in itself. Many leave home before 8 a.m. to get to work by 10 a.m. Burch, who works at the King of Prussia Mall's T-Mobile store, gets on the Market Frankford line at Church Station, near Kensington Avenue, to get to 13th Street.

Hite, a 53-year-old South Philadelphia woman, takes three buses to get to work at the business park. In April, her employer, BNY Mellon, moved its Center City offices.

"I went from a 20-minute drive to work to now a two-hour drive to work," she said.

She has a car, but says she does not feel comfortable driving on highways.

The 41 seats on the bus to King of Prussia filled quickly on a recent Tuesday. Tinny music could just be heard from people's ear buds. Two women had a chat over a take-out breakfast. Most were quiet. Some slept.

"I relax," Burch said, "prepare my mind for whatever I've got to do."

Tanner, 21, who was reading during her nearly three-hour commute from Kensington, started work at a Starbucks in the mall three months ago because she lived nearby at the time, she said. She hopes to save enough money to quit and tour with her indie rock band, Voila!.

Transportation experts say commuters like these typically accept no more than a two-stage commute. The light-rail spur would make the King of Prussia trip a three-stage ride for many. The benefits of reliability could trump those factors, though, officials said.

"They're working low-wage jobs where, often, they don't have the option to be late," Guerra said.

He also said he believed the rail link would attract to King of Prussia those who might otherwise be deterred from working there. SEPTA estimates rail would draw 8,500 riders a day.

Burch's bosses are understanding, he said, when he calls to say he'll be late because of traffic.

On the ride to work, people seemed relaxed. That is not the case on the return trip. Leaving work at 5 or 6 p.m. means meeting the worst of rush-hour traffic.

"I think it really is awful," Tanner said. "I think everyone's annoyed, too, so the energy is in the air."

A bad commute in the evening hours means missing valuable family time, Burch said. He has two sons, 14 and 9, and a 6-year-old daughter. He has missed his sons' football games because the bus was stuck in traffic.

"It's a headache when you're waiting there," he said. "After working all day you want to get home."