

## PASSENGER RAIL

Berks County is not currently served by passenger rail service. Originally served by both the Reading and Pennsylvania railroads, service was gradually reduced due to the loss of ridership to passenger vehicles and changing land uses along the line along with growing operating costs. The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) provided the last passenger rail service in the County between Reading and Philadelphia. It ended in 1982. Since that time, multiple studies have been undertaken investigating the feasibility of this service.

One of the more recent studies prepared by Transportation Economics and Management Systems, Inc. in July 2020 for Berks Alliance and the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance examined the potential for restoring passenger rail service to Berks County. The *Restoring Passenger Rail Service to Berks County, PA* plan includes information on service and operations, infrastructure needs and associated capital costs, projected ridership, benefits of reestablishing **intercity** passenger rail service, and next steps for implementation.

Another study was developed by PennDOT in December 2020. The *Reading to Philadelphia Passenger Rail Analysis* addresses the feasibility of restoring **commuter** passenger rail service along the historic rail corridor that connects Norristown to Pottstown and Reading. The analysis includes possible service alternatives, capital improvements, and identifies the next steps that are needed for implementation.

In early 2021, the Tri-County Passenger Rail Committee was created to assess the potential to establish passenger rail service between Reading and Philadelphia. The Committee was a collaborative effort between Berks, Chester and Montgomery Counties. The Committee recognized the value that reestablishing service could have for economic development, property values, and increased job opportunities as a result of the additional transportation option passenger rail service offers.

The Tri-County Passenger Rail Committee evaluated both studies and mode options. **Intercity** service has fewer longer distant trips. **Commuter** service offers increased frequency and a greater number of stops but at a higher cost. As this analysis was under way, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) was approved by the Federal government. It contained significant funds to improve intercity passenger rail service across the country. At this same time, Amtrak released its vision plan for passenger rail expansion that included, among many other considerations, a proposed extension from its existing Northeast Corridor service in Philadelphia to Reading. Both Amtrak and SEPTA were contacted regarding their potential interest in serving this corridor. Amtrak indicated its interest in moving forward based on its vision plan. SEPTA was not interested in looking at expanding its services to this corridor at this time based on its current focus of expanding another line into the King of Prussia area and high system maintenance needs.

In 2022, the Tri-County Passenger Rail Committee recommended the establishment of an authority. The Schuylkill River Passenger Rail Authority (SRPRA), approved in April 2022, replaced the Tri-County Passenger Rail Committee and has the power to formalize agreements, procure funding and provide for a direct governmental body that can work with Amtrak, PennDOT, the Federal Railroad Administration and other necessary partners.

Although the creation of the SRPRA is not a guarantee that passenger rail service will return, it was a crucial next step in continuing the long process of research and planning. The process being undertaken by the SRPRA is building upon the lessons learned from the studies of years past and is primarily focused on partnering with Amtrak as the proposed operator and participating in the Intercity Rail Corridor Identification and Development Program (CIDP) being led by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). Other key stakeholders beyond the constituent counties of the Authority and Amtrak include the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT), the anticipated host railroads including Norfolk Southern, CSX, SEPTA, and municipal governments, sponsor organizations and advocacy groups along the Reading – Philadelphia Corridor segment.

The SRPRA project plan is a three (3) phase approach, focusing on the most viable and realistically attainable service options to restore passenger rail service to the region in the short-term. The long-term possibilities for the service have

wide-reaching benefits to expand mobility opportunities and an alternative to driving for adjoining communities. Phase 1 includes the Reading – Philadelphia Segment. It is envisioned that this route will start by offering between four and six daily round-trips per day. This could grow to approximately eight or more daily round-trips once ridership grows. Part of this phase involved the integration of Amtrak Thruway Bus Service to complement the passenger rail service. Phase 2 would involve the completion of the Reading – Philadelphia – New York One-Seat Ride. This phase would require the completion of the Gateway Project in New York and delivery of new Amtrak rolling stock. The Gateway Project includes the construction of a new Hudson Tunnel and the rehabilitation of the existing North River Tunnel, with a targeted completion of 2035 for the new tunnel. This project will significantly increase the number of daily passenger trips and trains that can travel through the area. Phase 3 involves the long-term possibilities that could arise with the development of this new service. Long-term possibilities include the potential connection to Harrisburg via PennDOT's Keystone/Pennsylvanian service and a connection to the Lehigh Valley.

Initial planning by the SRPRA established all of the work that the Authority will undertake to achieve the successful result of bringing back passenger rail service to the region. The first step in the process was sending a Letter of Interest to the FRA when they announced that they would identify worthy projects in a Corridor Identification and Development Program (CIDP) that would guide **intercity** passenger rail development throughout the country.

Funding by the FRA is integral to the success of the SRPRA's objectives and preliminary planning has revolved around submitting a successful application and aligning with partners who can aid the SRPRA in getting to the next phase.

### **Corridor Identification and Development Program (CIDP)**

The CIDP, by the FRA, is a pathway for all **intercity** passenger rail corridor projects created as part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), aka the Bi-partisan Infrastructure Law, on November 15, 2021. SRPRA submitted an Expression of Interest letter to FRA in July 2022 and CIDP application in March 2023. SRPRA was accepted into the CIDP on December 8, 2023.

The FRA CIDP includes three (3) steps:

#### **1. Scoping Exercise (CIDP Step 1)**

Within this step, the statement of work, schedule, and cost estimate to prepare the Service Development Plan (SDP) are defined. Additionally, project management team roles and responsibilities, processes and procedures for maintenance of schedule and budget, and compliance with federal reporting requirements are addressed. The Scoping Exercise is currently complete.

#### **2. Service Development Plan (SDP) (CIDP Step 2)**

The SDP is a business plan, operating plan and capital plan, that documents the investment case for a proposed passenger rail service. The SDP must demonstrate operational feasibility, financial feasibility, and value and merit of the proposed passenger rail service. The FRA provides a structure within which an SDP must be organized. The structure includes the following components:

- Formal Project Goals and Objectives / Statement of Purpose and Need
- Identification and Evaluation of Alternatives
- Ridership and Revenue Forecasts
- Operational Analysis
- Station and Access Analysis
- Conceptual Engineering and Capital Programming
- Operations and Maintenance Costs and Capital Replacement Forecasts / Financial Plan
- Long-Term Governance Plan
- Public Benefits Analysis

The process of developing the SDP is iterative. The Authority will prepare an initial version of the SDP and will update it as new information becomes available as a result of work being performed both within the SDP

preparation process (such as Conceptual Engineering) and outside the process (such as documentation required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)). As an example, during operations analysis, results may be found that change the infrastructure improvements needed to support the proposed service, which would in-turn affect capital and operations and maintenance costs.

The preparation of the initial version of the SDP generally overlaps with the Conceptual Design and Engineering stage, while subsequent updates of the SDP take place as needed during the Preliminary Design and Engineering, Final Design and Engineering, and Construction stages of the project. Pending the completion of the Scoping Exercise, the targeted completion of this step is sometime in the year 2026.

### **3. Preliminary Engineering and Design (CIDP Step 3)**

During this step, critical infrastructure needs and improvements such as track, tunnels, stations, signals and positive train controls (PTC) are addressed. NEPA documentation is also required that defines categorical exclusion and selected analyses including air quality impacts, traffic impacts, historical resources, and others.

#### **Station Planning**

Although the SRPRA has taken a leadership role in the effort to restore rail passenger service in the Reading – Philadelphia Corridor segment, the Authority will not have direct responsibility for some aspects of the project. Among these is the planning and development of passenger rail stations suitable for Amtrak intercity passenger train operations. The role of the Authority regarding stations is the subject of a formal policy, and the Authority has endorsed the use of all applicable Amtrak standards in the station planning and development process.

#### **Station Development Policy**

The SRPRA has adopted a policy regarding station development that is consistent with Amtrak's, by which primary responsibility for providing station facilities typically rests with local entities, including the municipalities in which proposed stations are located, as well as local private sector entities and civic organizations. The SRPRA will help coordinate and facilitate station development in a supporting role once the lead entity and its partners have committed to the station project. The Authority may also take a major role with regard to the portion of station facilities within the host railroad right-of-way, essentially consisting of the station platform(s).

Regarding standards, the Authority has shared Amtrak's Station Planning and Development Guidebook with parties pursuing a potential station in their community. The Guidebook addresses the planning and development process, along with design standards generally required by Amtrak and specifically required for compatibility with freight trains in a shared-track environment such as is proposed between Reading and Philadelphia. The Authority has also made available Norfolk Southern's General Principles Guiding Norfolk Southern's Evaluation of Passenger Station Proposals, which will apply to stations developed on their property.

#### **Local Station Partners**

As station planning and development activities advance in the communities of Reading, Pottstown and Phoenixville, information will be shared on the Authority website: <https://gosrpra.com/> and links will be provided to websites of station project sponsors.

In terms of funding, on March 17, 2023 it was announced that the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance was awarded a Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development grant of \$142,346 to support station development activities, potentially including site identification, study of zoning strategies to foster development that complements the planned rail service, and other activities. Additionally, on April 7 it was announced that the Borough of Pottstown received

a Thriving Communities grant from the US Department of Transportation, which will help support initial planning for their passenger rail station. Pending completion of the SDP, the targeted completion of this step is sometime in 2027.

The Reading MPO staff completed a preliminary evaluation of possible train station locations in the City of Reading. Although this evaluation was conducted without any direct contact with staff from either Norfolk Southern or Amtrak this evaluation established several basic operational needs to consider when identifying and evaluating potential passenger rail station locations in the City. To effectively determine the best potential site for the establishment of a passenger rail station location uniform criteria was established. The criteria included but is not limited to:

- The site should be within walking distance (1/3 mile or 10-minute walk) of the BARTA Intermodal connector.
- The site should be within walking distance (1/3 mile or 10-minute walk) of both the Santander Performing Arts Center and Santander Arena.
- The site should have proximity to trip generators and trip destinations, including the County Services Center and Courthouse.
- The site should have potential for adjacent redevelopment and potential Transit Oriented Development (TOD) sites.
- The site should have access to off-street parking
- The site should accommodate a high-level platform.
- Limit disruption to vehicular and pedestrian crossings on Penn, Cherry, Franklin, and Chestnut Streets.

Based on the criteria above staff was able to determine potential train station locations and eliminate others from future consideration. This was the first step in evaluating potential sites. Much more planning needs to be done prior to a formal determination on a station location.

### **Final Design, Engineering and Construction**

Once all three steps of the CIDP have been completed, SRPRA will have Preliminary Design and environmental documentation materials and will be poised to enter final design and then construction. Final design and construction will require additional grant funding, applications for which are planned to be prepared during Step 3 of the CIDP effort.

### **Operation and Start of Service**

During Steps 2 and 3 of the CIDP, and potentially into final design, agreements will be negotiated with Amtrak as the proposed operator, and with Norfolk Southern and either CSX or SEPTA as host railroads. These agreements will embody provisions developed collaboratively with Amtrak and the Host Railroads during and after the CIDP effort. Several important issues will remain to be fully addressed at that time. For example, the coordination of timing of the service start-up and delivery of Amtrak's new Aero trainsets, which will dictate whether the service is launched with existing locomotives and cars or with the new trainsets. Funding for the initial years of operation is anticipated to be provided by the FRA, but long-term funding and governance of the service remains to be agreed and finalized. Pending completion of all engineering, design and construction service could begin by the year 2029.

### **Interim Bus Services**

As a precursor to the availability of passenger rail service, in June 2022 Amtrak started offering the Amtrak Thruway Bus Service between Reading and Philadelphia. This service provided two daily round-trips connecting Reading and Pottstown to Amtrak's network via Philadelphia. However, this service was discontinued in March 2025. The decision to end the service was based on insufficient revenue to cover the operating costs and lack of transfers to Amtrak rail service.