

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 from the 1930s through the 1970s due to the loss of ridership to automobiles 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 restoring 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.

As a result of the PennDOT analysis, The Reading to Philadelphia commuter passenger rail corridor was identified and included in the 2020 Pennsylvania State Rail Plan (<https://www.pa.gov/agencies/pennidot/programs-and-doing-business/rail-freight-ports/planning>). The plan provides an assessment of the current rail system, analysis of the role of rail and its integration within the state's transportation system and identifies future rail investments that would help achieve the state's vision for the rail system. The goals in the Pennsylvania State Rail Plan align with the state's LRTP and FMP goals for a multimodal transportation system. The state is currently in the process of updating the plan. The 2025 State Rail Plan will replace the 2020 State Rail Plan and will provide updates on rail development activity and will serve as a practical roadmap for future rail investment and policies.

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 among 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 trips over longer distances. **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 possibilities, 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 by the Berks County Commissioners in April 2022 and incorporated two months later, replaced the Tri-County Passenger Rail Committee and as a formal authority has the power to enter into agreements, own property, receive state and federal funding and 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 and, CSX, or SEPTA, municipal governments, and 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 round-trips per day. This could grow to approximately eight or more daily round-trips once ridership grows. Part of this phase may involve the addition 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. Once the new tunnel construction and existing tunnel rehabilitation are completed, 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 west from Reading to Harrisburg and east to the Lehigh Valley.

Funding from the FRA is integral to the success of 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 FRA CIDP is the 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 consists of 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 was formally completed in August 2025.

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. 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 targeted completion of this step is sometime in the year 2027.

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 at the 30% design level. Required NEPA documentation will also be prepared, currently envisioned to consist of categorical exclusion which would include selected analyses such as 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 plans to 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) and canopies.

Regarding standards, the Authority has shared Amtrak's Station Planning and Development Guidebook and Station Standards Handbook with parties pursuing a potential station in their community. These documents address 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.

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:

- 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 identify viable potential train station locations and eliminate other sites from future consideration. On March 17, 2023, the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance was awarded a Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED), Local Share Account (LSA) grant of \$142,346 to support station development activities including site identification. The engineering firm Stantec was selected to perform the site analysis, and was provided with the previously developed list of candidate sites. As a result of the Stantec analysis, it was recommended that the existing Franklin Street Station be used as the station, with the space being shared with the current restaurant/brew pub tenant. The possibility of moving in the future to a new facility that would be integrated into the BARTA bus terminal was also identified. In addition to the station planning work performed in Reading, similar efforts are underway in Pottstown and Phoenixville. The Borough of Pottstown benefitted from a rail service and station planning workshop that was funded through a Thriving Communities grant from the United States department of Transportation, and is currently participating in a station area planning study being performed by the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission. The Borough of Phoenixville is currently working with private developers to explore potential station plans in their community.

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 as soon as the year 2030.

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 primarily on the failure of the bus to generate sufficient connecting rail trips on Amtrak.

