

PUBLIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES
WILMAPCO Hybrid-format Meeting, August 14, 2023

Minutes prepared by Elizabeth Espinal.

Mr. Mike Kaszyski, PAC Chair, called the meeting to order at 6:06 p.m.

1. ROLL CALL

Members Present:

Tracy Chamblee, Southern New Castle County Alliance
Mike Kaszyski, Delaware State Chamber of Commerce and PAC Chair
Bill Lower, Committee of 100
Deanna Murphy, Cecil County Board of Realtors
Joshua Solge, City of Newark
Pat Folk, Cecil County (signed in late)

Absent:

Serene Abiy, University of Delaware
Mark Blake, GHADA
Carlos de los Ramos, AARP
Bill Dunn, Civic League for New Castle County
Mario Gangemi, Cecil County Chamber of Commerce
Ken Grant, AAA Mid-Atlantic
Richard Janney, Southern New Castle County
Glenn Pusey, Bear Glasgow Council
Anna Quisel, League of Women Voters of New Castle County
Gail Seitz, City of New Castle
Barry Shotwell, 7/40 Alliance
Vic Singer, Civic League for New Castle County
Dave Tancredi, Milltown-Limestone Civic Alliance

Staff Members:

Heather Dunigan, Principal Planner
Dave Gula, Principal Planner
Dawn Voss, Outreach Coordinator

Guests:

Cathy Smith, Delaware Transit Corporation

2. Approval of the June 12, 2023 Meeting Minutes

ACTION: Approval of the June 12, 2023, PAC Minutes was postponed due to lack of a quorum.

3. Public Comment Period:

None.

4. Executive Director's Report:

Ms. Heather Dunigan shared the following public outreach information:

- Council met July 13th and had several action items. They approved the two Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) Amendments for additional funding the US 13 Pedestrian Improvement Project and the I-295 Project. The council also approved Transportation Alternative Program (TAP) application for Port Deposit Marina Park and endorsed the 2023 Transportation Justice Bus connectivity analysis and the Ardens Transportation Plan.
- Staff are continuing to coordinate with DVRPC on a Climate Pollution Reduction Grant for the Philadelphia Metropolitan Statistical Area. An RFQ has been posted for consultant support on the effort on the DVRPC's website.
- The Southbridge Transportation Action Plan held a replay of the final public workshop on July 18 ahead of a final presentation to the Civic Association. Public comment on the draft plan closed on August 6. Council action is expected in September.
- WILMAPCO held interviews for consultants shortlisted for the East Elkton Traffic Circulation and Safety Plan on July 18th. Wallace Montgomery was selected to lead the East Elkton Traffic Circulation and Safety Plan.
- Three proposals were received for the Kirkwood Highway Corridor Master Plan and RK&K was selected to lead the Corridor Master Plan.
- Nine proposals were received for the South Claymont and Philadelphia Pike Corridor Master Plan. Three consultants are shortlisted for interviews in the last week of August.
- Wilmington Initiatives Open House Workshop was held on June 15th with twelve projects on display. Staff received excellent feedback from the public.
- The Newport Transportation Study project team presented the Newport Train Station Update to the Newport Transportation Plan Monitoring Committee.
- Staff presented to the Delaware State Chamber of Commerce Infrastructure Committee on June 13th to talk about the MPO process.
- On June 17th, staff participated in the Newark Family Bike Festival, doing a helmet fit check for the children.
- The Safe Streets for All in New Castle County had their advisory committee meeting on June 22nd. A draft report will be available for public review through August.
- Staff attended 2023 Northeast Association of State Transportation Officials Conference in Wilmington on July 11th and 12th.
- Staff presented and tabled at the New Castle County Chamber State of the County event on July 12th.
- Staff presented at an IPA sponsored Virtual Policy Forum entitled 'Delaware in 2040 – Demographic Changes and the Impacts on Infrastructure' on July 19th.
- On August 30th staff will be partnering with DeIDOT to collaborate on New Castle County TIP/CTP Workshop 4-6 p.m. at the Newark Free Library.
- We have hired a new Administrative Assistant. Ms. Elizabeth Espinal began working with us on July 17th.

ACTION ITEMS:

None

PRESENTATION/DISCUSSION ITEMS:

5. DART Reimagined.

Ms. Cathy Smith presented an overview of the DART Reimagined planning. DART is the public transit provider for the state of Delaware and has 960 employees, 529 vehicles, and an operating budget of around \$128 million. DART operates across the state with 3 unions, 2

administrative offices, 6 maintenance facilities, and 4 ticket offices, providing transit services on 362 days a year.

Ms. Smith mentioned that the pandemic caused a significant decline in ridership, especially in the commuter market due to the rise of remote work. DART, like many transit agencies, decided to conduct a reevaluation to identify its markets and determine where services are needed. DART initiated a three-step process called "DART Reimagined," involving evaluation, identification, and achievement phases. A digital survey with over 2,241 responses helped capture customer needs and preferences. Notably, cost, convenience, and reliability emerged as key influences on choosing transit.

The project is currently in the "Identify" phase, where they are identifying opportunities for a new, improved network that will serve both current and future riders. DART's service development process involves engaging with internal staff, executive advisory, and technical committees alongside the public. The goal is to design a network that enhances access to destinations, improves reliability and integrates modern technologies. Ms. Cathy Smith announced the introduction of micro-transit services to cater to specific needs within the communities they serve, of which you can make reservations by either calling or using the DART Connect phone application.

DART is committed to making the process as transparent as possible and invited PAC members to participate in workshops and discussions. More information on meeting dates can be found on the dedicated website: www.dartreimagined.com. As they move forward, they are committed to engage with stakeholders, gather input, and refine their plans. The main goal is to create a network that meets the evolving needs of DART riders while promoting safety, efficiency, and accessibility. DART highly encourages feedback and involvement of the public as they work to create a more effective and responsive transit system for Delaware. If PAC members have any questions or concerns they are welcome to email Ms. Smith at cathy.smith@delaware.gov

Mr. Bill Lower asked Ms. Cathy Smith when was the last time something of this magnitude took place or how frequently does DART undertake evaluations of similar significance. In addition, did certain routes fare better than others in terms of equity and accessibility during, or post COVID.

Ms. Cathy Smith responded, DART has biannual service assessments to evaluate route performance, addressing issues such as overcrowding and the need for additional trips. DART recently implemented significant changes in May, including route eliminations and resource allocations in the Middletown area. DART allocates time for people to adjust and observe trends. However, while this is a continuous process, projects of this magnitude are relatively infrequent. DART had a major transit redesign in 2014 and the implementation of the Wilmington Transit Center, both of which were substantial efforts in terms of changes, education, and marketing. Despite challenges presented during COVID era, ridership has shown signs of recovery; our fixed route ridership is about 75-80% of 2019 levels, paratransit is nearly back to 90%, while rail ridership is hovering around 50%. Interestingly, many commuter routes were impacted, whereas routes serving equitable and vulnerable populations remained relatively stable. These routes were vital for individuals who still needed to commute to work and limited alternatives. 75% of our routes are considered minority routes, throughout municipalities and the City of Wilmington. The communities with lower household car ownership or income levels continued to rely on our services.

Mr. Bill Lower added that it's reasonable to assume that people who could not work remotely relied heavily on these routes. Mr. Lower suggested that the Chairman for PAC coordinates a return meeting for Ms. Cathy Smith to provide a follow-up on the progress of the "DART Reimagined" network and the engagement outcome, he added that information would be highly valuable.

Mr. Mike Kaszyski raised the question of whether there were any distinctions between the rerouting of regular bus stops versus park and ride facilities. He also questioned whether there was a focus on developing more park and ride locations compared to regular stops.

Ms. Smith responded with shared insights garnered from stakeholder input and operator interviews. She emphasized the significance of addressing bus stop-related issues due to the substantial feedback received, particularly in terms of ADA compliance and safer access. While park and rides were seen as a method to generate density in lower density areas, the focus predominantly centered on improving existing bus stops, especially along fixed routes in Kent and Sussex Counties.

Mr. Kaszyski added that ADA compliance had also been a concern in other contexts, linking the situation to the Lottery Commission facility upgrades and convenience stores. He pointed out the need to upgrade existing stops to meet accessibility standards and mentioned instances of placing bus stops within larger sites such as warehouses.

Ms. Smith replied by noting the strong response about bus stop infrastructure issues received, leading to a decision to collaborate with consultants for specific infrastructure improvement recommendations within the ongoing study.

6. Newport Train Station Study Update

Mr. Dave Gula presented the Newport Transportation Study completed as part of the Newport Transportation Study Monitoring Committee. The focus of the Monitoring Committee was on updating the 2012 station study to prepare the community for a potential train station and address other initiatives aimed at making Newport a more walkable and bike-friendly town. The committee reviewed the initial study conducted in 2012, and then gathered new information from Amtrak, Delaware Transit Corp, and DeIDOT to prepare for presenting the potential plan to the community. The proposed site for the train station is in the center of Newport, which would serve as a convenient 10-minute walk for the surrounding neighborhoods. The area is characterized as being compact and walkable, though some concerns remain about walking and biking due to the disjointed sidewalk network and lack bicycling amenities.

A SWOT analysis was presented, highlighting the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the project. Strengths included the presence of businesses, new restaurants, and retail, as well as existing strong bus transit in the area. Weaknesses included the need to rebuild the station and challenges with sidewalk connections and biking routes. Opportunities were found in the town's walkability and regional location. Threats included the need for approvals from Amtrak and uncertain ridership in the post-COVID era.

The committee had productive discussions with Amtrak and DeIDOT, with Amtrak expressing support for the station and offering a plan for implementation. Phases were proposed for the construction of platforms and additional tracks. Phase I would include building a platform on existing track 1 and a crossover. Phase II would focus on a platform on the north side of track 3 for Newport (also at Churchman's Crossing), then Phase III would be the construction of track A and a movement of the platform along track 1.

Mr. Bill Lower asked about the feasibility of sharing track 1 for freight and SEPTA's passenger rail service at Newport for Phase I of the station project. Mr. Dave Gula confirms that this has been a challenge in the past due to the need to separate freight movements from high-level platforms meeting ADA requirements. However, in this case Norfolk Southern will be working on track 2, so their movements would not be impacted by Phase I of the station project.

Mr. Dave Gula continues, providing the station costs which are estimated at Phase I: \$25m; Phase II: \$45m; Phase III: \$45m. Parking remains a critical concern, with an estimated need for up to 200 spaces initially. Negotiations with businesses leasing state-owned lots and potential alternative parking areas were discussed. Improvements to pedestrian and cycling connections, particularly at the James Street underpass and Water Street, were highlighted, with a local development group expressing interest in supporting these enhancements.

Mr. Bill Lower noted the upcoming completion of the new bridge over Christina River, with improved pedestrian access.

Mr. Dave Gula continues with the suggestion of possibly using a small lot underneath SR 141 for parking. He showcases images of the current underpass beneath the NE Corridor and discusses plans for better lighting and a more inviting environment for pedestrians, emphasizing its importance for both station improvement and access to the Newport River Trail. Mr. Dave Gula concludes his presentation with the committee's next steps which include planning a public workshop to engage the community, updating projected SEPTA ridership estimates, and conducting follow-up discussions with Amtrak, MARC, and SEPTA. A meeting in the fall may take place for both the monitoring committee and the public workshop.

Mr. Bill Lower raised the question if by fall Dave means October or November and whether a specific date had been chosen. Additionally, Mr. Lower asked if any progress had been made in collaboration with the town. Mr. Gula said that a specific date has not been selected yet due to the need to complete ridership projections. He mentioned that these projections were time-consuming and required coordination with DelDOT. Mr. Gula acknowledged the challenge of pushing DelDOT for timely completion due to their involvement in various projects. He anticipates having an update in the next month regarding completion dates and suggested that scheduling the project might be feasible in October, but he preferred November if possible.

Mr. Tracy Chamblee inquired about the business community's awareness of the project. He questioned whether businesses in the vicinity like Wegman's and Amazon were informed about the project's plans. Mr. Gula acknowledged uncertainty regarding the level of awareness among these businesses. He noted their distance from the Newport community and the resulting lack of information. Mr. Gula outlined plans to enhance outreach for the next workshop, mentioning mailings and stakeholder engagement. He mentioned the collaboration with partners like Harvey & Hanna to spread awareness. He expressed openness to the suggestion of involving more businesses in the future. Mr. Chamblee also pointed out the presence of a large Walmart store in that area and suggested exploring the possibility of utilizing the stores for future outreach.

Mr. Lower added that the Delaware Prosperity Partnership estimated substantial reinvestment along the 141 ARC corridor in the coming decade, which could contribute to the desired ridership for the Newport project. Mr. Gula thanked everyone for their work and collaboration and welcomed additional questions.

7. Other Business

None.

8. Adjournment

The PAC adjourned at 7:21 p.m.

Attachments: (0)