



Lehigh Valley Transportation Study

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PennDOT, LVTS Announce Lehigh Valley Passenger Rail Study

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) is funding a study to determine what it would take to bring passenger rail travel back to the Lehigh Valley.

PennDOT Deputy Secretary Jennie A. Louwerse Wednesday, during a meeting of the Lehigh Valley Transportation Study, announced a comprehensive study to determine the costs, ridership potential and ongoing expenses that would come from creating a passenger rail connection that would help riders travel beyond the Lehigh Valley region.

The announcement comes as the \$1.2 trillion federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) allocates \$66 billion into improving and enhancing passenger rail service nationwide.

“The great thing about the Infrastructure Law is that it allows us to take a look at what it takes to reinstate [passenger rail] service,” Louwerse said to the LVTS. “I believe this study will provide a solid foundation for the Lehigh Valley to know what do we need to do to make this happen.”

Louwerse said the study would likely start in the next two months and take about a year. Its purpose is to study the costs, including the annual subsidy that would be needed. It will also try to determine how many people would use it and detail the lengthy process that would be required to advance any project involving passenger rail through the region. Expected to cost about \$300,000, the study will also review potential routes, including to New York through Newark, as well as to Philadelphia and Harrisburg, said Becky Bradley, LVTS Secretary and Executive Director of LVPC.

Ridership forecasts, service alternatives, operation and maintenance estimates, capital costs, the approval process and next steps will be included. It will also evaluate potential partners from New Jersey Transit, the Southern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) in Philadelphia, Amtrak, the Lehigh and Northampton Transportation Authority (LANTA) and even private-public partnerships, Bradley said.

Louwerse has said that building a Lehigh Valley rail extension would take at least a decade.

Louwerse first appeared before the LVTS in May during a discussion of the State’s Rail Plan, and was invited back to discuss passenger rail for the region. Most of the active rail tracks through the Lehigh Valley are owned by Norfolk Southern Rail Corp. and used for the movement of freight, but a new infusion of funding in the IIJA has rail advocates from across the state and nation calling for expansion of the passenger network.

The LVTS is the federal designated Metropolitan Planning Organization for the Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton Metropolitan Statistical Area and the legal entity to manage passenger rail analysis for the Lehigh Valley region.

“Those of us in government do not have the luxury of just living in the present,” said Northampton County Executive Lamont McClure, who chairs the LVTS. “One eye must always be kept on the future in an effort to anticipate the needs of impending generations. And one of those needs will definitely be more efficient and less polluting transportation options such as passenger rail.”

Pennsylvania currently has passenger rail provided by SEPTA, the Port Authority of Allegheny County and Amtrak, which runs a Pennsylvania line that stretches from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia and a Keystone Service line running from Harrisburg to Philadelphia. Both of those Amtrak routes continue to New York City.

“We’re a growing region with increasing transportation needs,” Bradley said. “The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and its increased focus on passenger rail, gives us a great opportunity to determine what a passenger rail investment can be for our long-term success.”

With the IJJA’s passage last November, similar efforts to expand passenger rail through Pennsylvania are also taking place in Reading and Wilkes-Barre and the Philadelphia region.

It’s not the first time the Lehigh Valley has studied the passenger rail issue. In 2010, Lehigh and Northampton counties and the Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corp. funded an analysis of what it would take to create a “Pennsylvania Component” of New Jersey Transit’s Raritan Valley line from central New Jersey. That final report estimated that capital costs would be \$650-\$710 million, with ongoing annual subsidies of about \$11.6 million. The Pennsylvania legislature funds annual subsidies for the state’s existing passenger rail lines.

Unlike that 2010 study, this new study will meet Federal Railroad Administration standards, a step necessary for the consideration of adding new routes to the system.

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