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Near rail stops, transit villages begin to sprout

Collingswood, Haddonfield, and other PATCO towns are looking to capitalize.

The signs of change have been slowly showing up around stations on the PATCO High-Speed Line the last few years.

Near the Collingswood stop, work began last year on the Lumber Yard development: 119 condos and townhouses and 19 shops.

In Haddonfield, townhouses were built across from the station, and condos were built above stores about a block away. And in Woodcrest, a former steel plant near the rail stop was converted into offices for hundreds of workers.

The same has been true in Pennsylvania, where businesses and housing have been proposed or built around some SEPTA stations in Conshohocken, Ardmore, and Pennbrook in Lansdale.

While fully completed “transit villages” may be years away, local municipalities and government-financed studies have already spurred development near the rail stops.

And it is only the beginning, say local officials and developers who hope to transform sprawling asphalt parking lots at stations into compact “transit-oriented developments.”

In about a month, the Delaware River Port Authority is expected to produce a draft of a study that officials will use as the blueprint for development at the Lindenwold, Ashland, Woodcrest, Haddonfield, Westmont, Collingswood and Ferry Avenue PATCO stations.

“The study looks at the PATCO property and the property immediately adjacent,” said Cheryl Spicer, assistant general manager of PATCO. “It will show us what kind of development will be beneficial to us as the transit operator to increase ridership.”

Officials say the villages can also contribute to a town’s economic health, creating vibrancy and a place where people want to live and work.

PATCO ridership, though up 3 percent this year, showed steep yearly declines over the last decade. In response, tens of millions of dollars were earmarked to revamp the ticketing system, renovate stations, and pay for the transit-village study by Wallace Roberts & Todd of Philadelphia.

The Camden County Improvement Authority is working with the port authority to promote transit villages along the PATCO line.

“We see this as an opportunity for future development,” said Jeffrey Swartz, executive director of the Camden County Improvement Authority. “You might have a dry cleaner, a small bakery, things along those lines. Or you might have businesses with activities that cater to the evening – restaurants, movie theaters, playhouses.”

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Swartz said planners had to be creative, possibly building decks over the parking lots where businesses could be located.

"We have to go up and not out," he said. "It has to be a vertical mode, multifaceted parking, retail and housing."

PATCO hopes to make better use of its combined 123 acres of surface parking at its Ferry Avenue station in Camden and its Lindenwold station.

"We need parking and don't want ridership adversely affected" by development, Spicer said. "One alternative is putting up a garage. We need one-to-one replacement of parking spaces."

Three years ago, two studies focused on development around rail stations. The Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission found that most of the region's 340 fixed-rail stations were surrounded by development that failed to promote ridership and the local economy. It also identified 45 rail stops suitable for development, including the Lindenwold station, where there are 32 acres of parking, and the Bryn Mawr station, where there is a block-size parking lot.

A study by the Philadelphia architectural and planning firm Kise Straw & Kolodner focused on PATCO and analyzed development possibilities at Haddonfield, Westmont, Collingswood and Ferry Avenue, said Ed Fox, the Camden County Improvement Authority's planning director.

The report made communities and developers aware of how they might become part of the change at the transit stops, said Fox, also vice chairman of the Collingswood planning board.

The borough "took the recommendations of the study and said, 'We will do it,'" he said.

Collingswood was then designated a transit village by the state and received a \$200,000 grant for streetscaping, traffic-calming measures, road improvements, bicycle paths, and a station upgrade.

The Lumber Yard project followed, and the first of three buildings is expected to be completed next year.

"Having a sea of parking does nothing for anyone," Collingswood Mayor James Maley said. "There's no benefit to the town."

The transit village "is the most logical way to go for developed towns to increase the ratable base," he added. "It helps the trains, it helps the businesses, and helps the town overall with more vibrancy."

Maley said the transit village "doesn't have the typical single-family housing and doesn't bring a lot of kids. There is more housing for empty-nesters, more for young folks. It also provides property-tax relief. You don't have to build new schools for this. You don't have to add more cops for this. It makes sense."

Haddon Township also looked at the transit-village research and asked Fieldstone Associates of Doylestown to draw up plans for one there, Fox said. And in Lindenwold, officials designated land next to the PATCO station as a redevelopment area and are seeking developers.

"Transit villages tend to attract people with disposable income," Fox said. "People are looking for a downtown living environment that they can walk to, and that means patronage of the local businesses and participation in civic and cultural activities. They add life to the downtown districts."