

City's Capital Center plan too vital to be sidetracked

Chester Smolski

Three major criticisms of the Capital Center project have emerged as a result of public hearings being held on this proposed development for downtown Providence. These criticisms are focused on: 1. relocation of the new railway station 1,200 feet northeast of the present Union Station; 2. elimination of the connection for a through East Bay-West Bay rail service; and 3. construction of a boulevard that would parallel the present railroad tracks. All of these criticisms have merit.

Those who favor the plan's implementation claim that the proposed development would provide an economic upturn for the city center. The \$73.9 million project would generate 4,800 jobs and, in time, return more than \$6 million in new taxes to the city of Providence. These numbers paint a convincing picture of the proposal.

So here we have it: some individuals and groups presenting strong arguments against the proposal and, subsequently, three organizations filing suit in U.S. District Court to prevent its implementation. On the other hand, other individuals and groups see it as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to provide a major stimulus to the economic revitalization of the city center. Both groups, of

course, feel that they are right, but the real question is not which is right, but rather, which position is the better of the two.

Lines between these two groups were drawn as early as the spring of 1980 in a series of public meetings "...at which time two distinct camps of opinion emerged — business and labor in favor; rail passengers, ecology advocates and admirers of Union Station opposed." Thus stated the 1980 Annual Report of the Providence Department of Planning and Urban Development. The lines separating the two, unfortunately, are getting more rigid.

Project opposers are looking at the issue from a transportation point of view, and project advocates are considering it from an economic viewpoint. The opposers are concerned about removal of the railway station to the periphery of downtown and making it too far removed from the bus terminal to make a transportation interface. Also, they question the elimination of the future potential to use East Bay railroad tracks as a connector with the West Bay. But what may be the major transportation difficulty would be the construction of a six-lane boulevard (Route 6 extension) just to the north of the existing railroad tracks that would allow cars to exit off of Route I-95 and drive to Memorial Square without encountering Kennedy Plaza. Surprisingly, this boulevard construction has brought only sporadic comments from local opponents,

but a team of eight experts from the Urban Land Institute who came to Providence to comment on the plan, criticized the boulevard as presenting a potential new "Chinese Wall" downtown, to replace the present obstructive railroad tracks and bridges.

The suit brought to court by the National Association of Railroad Passengers, its Rhode Island counterpart and Ecology Action, claims that the plan benefits the business community rather than rail passengers (violation of federal law) and that the Environmental Impact Statement prepared by the Federal Rail Administration is incomplete.

Trying to wade through the 390-page, FRA-prepared document which arrived in June lends credence to the thoroughness of the report rather than its incompleteness. In fact, more than a half of the document consists of letters of endorsement and criticism of the proposal, and where questions are raised, the document answers each one. In the case of the executive director of the National Association of Railroad Passengers, all 48 points raised are answered — so are those from the other two organizations which also filed suit against the proposal.

The second issue of the lawsuit raises the question of benefit to rail passengers. This question may turn on a legal point, owing to federal involvement and, of course, its 80 percent contribution to

project costs, but the real question should be: "for whose benefit — rail passengers or the city of Providence?"

Of the 800 daily passengers entering Union Station that were surveyed in 1975, only 40 to 80 had destinations downtown. By 1990 it is projected that this number will be only 140. Should this be the pivotal point of a project? Or should this concern be directed toward the 157,000 residents of the capital city?

Historic buildings, ecological concerns, good design, adequate open space and available cultural resources help to make our lives fuller, and all of these need to be considered in the Capital Center proposal. But at a time when Providence has gone through the traumatic experience of a tax increase, lowered bond ratings, employee firings and strikes, and all the while it continues to lose population, accumulate more abandoned houses, close its libraries and suffer continuing retail decline in the downtown — economic impact on local residents must be a major consideration. Economic activity — plainly stated, this means jobs — is a vital concern for city stability and citizen benefit: the Capital Center would be a major stimulator for such economic activity and is too important to the life of the Providence community to be sidetracked.

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Chester E. Smolski is Director of Geography and Urban Studies, Rhode Island College.