

Questions raised on railroad location

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A second public hearing on the proposed relocation of the railroad station and tracks in Providence was held on October 25 in the state capitol. Approximately 40 people were in attendance; most of whom were from Providence; most of whom raised substantive questions about the proposed relocation; and most of whom were opposed to it.

The purpose of the meeting was for consultants to the Federal Railroad Administration to receive public reactions to the four suggested alternatives regarding the relocation and additional comments on the environmental effect of such a proposed move. This required Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) must have citizen participation as part of the process. Other meetings have also been held, and will be held, with representatives of approximately 18 community groups so as to get a broad-based community reaction to what will certainly have the greatest influence on the character of our capital city in this generation.

A third public hearing will be held in February at which time the consultants will report their EIS preliminary findings and receive public comments in order to refine their conclusions. By early summer the draft EIS will be presented, further refined, and then submitted in its final form.

Providence is one of 15 cities in the Northeast Corridor Improvement Project in which improvements will be made to railroads and stations for an improved railroad system in this part of the country. It is important to note that this city is the only one of these cities to recommend that these improvements be made in conjunction with a relocated station and tracks in order to provide more usable land in the downtown, open up new investment opportunities.

The non-profit Providence Foundation, organized by approximately 30 corporations and business firms five years ago, is responsible for the proposal, one which was devised after working closely with city and state agencies and hiring of its own consultants to determine if the project were feasible.

The Foundation presents a convincing case. Citing increased areas for development, new commercial buildings, increased tax base, more open space, better utilization of the river, increased accessibility to the downtown, and the need to meet suburban competition, the Foundation sees an opportunity to make more productive use of the land north of the railway station.

Enthusiastically accepted by the mayor of the city and the governor of the state when first proposed, it appears that this ~~Go~~ Capital ~~or~~ project, ~~land~~ is owned in approximately equal amounts by Amtrak, private interests and the city) is moving toward implementation. A positive EIS and adequate federal funding, as well as city and state money, assure the go-ahead on a project that will take at

least 10 years to complete. But why were so many citizens at this latest public hearing opposed to the project?

The more one studies the proposal, the more questions are raised about its attributes, and some would say its merits. In fact, 40 issues have already been identified from meetings of the community representatives. Such issues as adequate provisions for pedestrian crossings, impact on the existing downtown, availability of funds to complete the non-federal commitments, reuse of the existing Union Station, air quality at intersections, effects of vibration on the state capitol, and high water table indicate the range of topics that must be resolved.

Two critical questions remain to be answered. Is there a demand for the anticipated 1 to 1.6 million square feet of new construction that would come in the first 10 years of development? The Inbank site with its 600,000 square feet of office space and the LaSalle Square site with its hotel-jewelry mart-convention complex are still possible developments. A new GSA building will soon be built. In addition, many older buildings are now undergoing renovation for additional office space. Just how much more office space is needed downtown? That question needs to be answered in terms of the proposed office construction in the Capital

The second question is based upon the future price of oil. An economics professor from the University of Rhode Island has made the point that when the price of a barrel of oil reaches the \$40-\$50 level (it has already reached \$40 in the spot market), the cost of filling a 20-gallon tank will be \$50!

Given these figures, one has to consider our means of transportation in the next decade and beyond. Will we be able to use the automobile as freely when considering that a higher priority will certainly be fuel oil, which price closely follows gasoline. If next year's fuel oil prices rise at the same rate as this year's 70 percent, then the cost of heating the average home will be close to \$1,800 annually. If that happens, and it will in time, and the \$50 tankful of gasoline is common, then how effective will be an automobile-oriented Capital Center development?

These are tough questions, but they need answers. The Providence Foundation saved an Ocean State Theater, worked diligently to have the state court complex locate in the downtown, and now sees opportunity in a railroad relocation. But this issue of relocation demands a better dialogue than is currently being offered. It would be in the interests of the city and state community for the city of Providence to conduct its own public hearings to explain the ramifications of this proposal. Political short-term expediency must take a back seat to the thoughtful and intelligent choices for the ~~less~~ term that must come after a thorough discussion of the issues. To date, too few have had too few opportunities to express such opinions.

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