

RAIL

PA: Norley pushes for reinstating commuter rail service from West Chester to Philadelphia

Former mayor and borough council president Jordan Norley lobbied council at Wednesday's meeting to consider adding a referendum question to the November ballot.

By Bill Rettew

Source Daily Local News, West Chester, Pa. (TNS)

April 22, 2024

Apr. 19—WEST CHESTER — Former mayor and borough council president Jordan Norley lobbied council at Wednesday's meeting to consider adding a referendum question to the November ballot.

While representing the Restoration Rail Committee, Norley asked to add a question to the ballot, which would "help prove a mandate" that residents want to reestablish passenger rail service between West Chester and Philadelphia.

"The best way to prove support would be to ask our citizens," Norley said. "A ballot initiative during the presidential election would ensure the highest turnout of residents."

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Borough of West Chester be amended, effective immediately, to include a "right to clean, sustainable, and affordable rail trains from West Chester to Philadelphia?"

The county board of elections would place the question on the ballot and have the final say on the question's language. Norley hopes that council will vote on the proposal at the May meeting.

Norley favors linking the SEPTA right-of-way between Wawa and West Chester by connecting rail service to the rest of the network. This would ultimately allow workers and residents to go back and forth from West Chester to Philadelphia along with — access to several stations in between — on zero emission battery trains.

Last year, a caravan of rail supporters visited Pop-Up Metro's 1.8-mile test track at Rockhill Furnace, on the East Broad Top Railroad, to learn about and ride battery trains.

Under a short-term lease, Pop-Up Metro, would lease its "Pop-Up Metro Kit." Pop-up Metro has agreed to gift a \$5-million to \$6- million train set and supporting infrastructure for the rail line, which would qualify as the typical 20% local match for federal funding. SEPTA is opposed to the project, while citing the cost.

Norley argued that under the Community Bill of Rights, citizens have the "Right to clean, affordable, and sustainable rail transit service" like they do with water and air. The borough historically had rail service from 1858 to 1986. The population has grown 70% along the West Chester Branch since rail service ended in 1986.

Councilwoman Nicole Scimone rides the train from either Exton, Paoli or Malvern, four days per week, as a commuter to Philadelphia.

"I'm not sure if we need that right," she said. "I'm not sure if it's the same right as clean water."

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"The ask here is for the solicitor to get a draft ordinance for next month," Norley told Vaccaro.

"We want to make sure when we go down the road what our expectation is," Councilman Bernie Flynn said about not being confusing.

Mayor Lillian DeBaptiste asked why the Home Rule Charter might be changed.

"Why does it rise to the level of having to be on the Home Rule Charter?" DeBaptiste asked.

"To me it's a very strong statement," Norley said. "It's just stronger."

Norley also said that a pro-train ballot response would help with obtaining funding from a variety of sources.

Councilman Brian McGinnis noted that SEPTA could be eliminating some established service to West Chester.

"West Chester citizens have the right to public transportation," he said. "Building momentum is a good thing.

"This is a good endeavor."

The item was placed on the May agenda for the Smart Growth Committee for further discussion.

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