



NH Businesses for Transportation & Infrastructure

Learn more at www.nhbti.org

Published: Sunday, February 8, 2009

3 city sites studied for rail station

By *PATRICK MEIGHAN* Staff Writer
pmeighan@nashuatelegraph.com

NASHUA – As the push for commuter rail picks up steam, a regional planning agency is in the midst of a study of potential sites in the city for a rail station.

The Nashua Regional Planning Commission is conducting a site evaluation study and has a lead role in the technical work to prepare for commuter rail, said Steve Williams, the NRPC executive director.

While results of the federally funded \$75,000 study won't be out until April, the NRPC is focusing on three potential areas.

One is in south Nashua, where a proposed development has stalled, but also includes the former Furniture World retail store at 168 Daniel Webster Highway.

The second area is in the city's north end on a site that had once been proposed as the location of a privately funded bridge over the Merrimack River.

The third area contains three sites closer to the downtown from just north of Bridge Street to near East Hollis Street.

Talk of commuter rail heated up on the state level as proponents eyed the possibility of federal economic stimulus money being earmarked for establishing a commuter rail link between southern New Hampshire and Boston.

Such a link would attract young professionals and college graduates to southern New Hampshire's technical companies, said Tom Galligani, the city's economic development director.

Some local companies have had difficulty hiring young professionals who preferred to live in Boston, he said.

A rail link to Boston also could help the development of the city's downtown, Galligani said.

Likewise, a group of state business leaders has said commuter rail could help ease southern New Hampshire's economic woes.

The New Hampshire Businesses for Transportation and Infrastructure announced its support for the request for \$300 million from the state's Department of Transportation and Rail Transit Authority for the passenger rail system.

This commuter rail project would link Concord, Manchester, Bedford and Nashua with Boston, the group noted.

"This is a once-in-lifetime opportunity to invest in our infrastructure, our economy and our future," NHBTI President Mark Richardson said. "It is absolutely vital for New Hampshire that we invest in projects that create opportunity today, yet will serve us well for decades to come."

As for potential sites in Nashua for a rail station: In south Nashua, property at the former Dow Chemical plant site just north of Spit Brook Road has long been attractive to rail proponents. The site is the location of a stalled retail development called Nashua Landing.

If the development gets moving, a rail station could be integrated into the project, Williams said.

Also, a parking area could be located on the Hudson side of the river as part of the redevelopment of Green Meadow Golf Club.

“We don’t think it’s going to be economically feasible to put a trestle across the river,” Williams said.

However, parking could be located there, with a pedestrian bridge crossing the river to a train station on the Nashua side, he said.

The Merrimack River is narrow at that location and is about the same width as the space between the terminal and parking garage at the Manchester-Boston Regional Airport, Williams said.

Another potential site in south Nashua is at the north end of the former Dow Chemical property at the former Furniture World location. The disadvantage is the former store would have to be razed and a new building constructed, Williams said.

In the city’s north end, a potential site for a train station had been proposed as the location of a privately funded bridge over the Merrimack River until neighborhood opposition scuttled plans.

Beazer East, of Pittsburgh, acquired the 97-acre site and office building in 1984 from the Koppers Co., a former manufacturer of railroad ties.

The company treated the ties with creosote, a mixture of chemicals. The state shut down Koppers Co. in the early 1980s, when it was discovered that creosote and arsenic from the site were seeping into the Merrimack River.

Beazer East is under a consent agreement with the state to clean up contamination at the site.

Besides the need for an environmental cleanup, a disadvantage of building a rail station there would be access into the site, Williams said.

In between the Beazer and Dow properties lies the former location of the Johns Manville asbestos plant on Bridge Street, one of three sites closer to downtown, Williams said.

The other potential downtown sites are just north of the railroad yard and near East Hollis Street.

A train station near downtown would be a different type of station, Williams said.

A station at the north or south Nashua sites would have high ridership and a need for parking, while a downtown station would mostly be accessible by pedestrians or by bus, he said.

Of course, there would be the potential for more than one station if the federal money does come through.

“From my perspective, I think there should be more than one station in Nashua, definitely,” Galligani said.

A rail station would create a real-estate boom in the immediate area, he said.

Galligani formerly worked in Lowell and Lawrence, Mass., and he thinks the same benefits that commuter rail brought to those cities could occur in Nashua.

Rail helped attract high-end housing to downtown Lowell, he said.

“There’s been a huge growth of young professionals and empty-nesters,” Galligani said. “I think Nashua has the same potential.”

Of course, all the planning is for naught if the federal stimulus money doesn’t materialize, as no state money is available to establish commuter rail, proponents say.

All public transportation is subsidized, even airlines, said Wayne Gagne, chairman of the Nashua Commuter Rail Advisory Committee.

“If the stimulus package doesn’t come through, we will never see commuter rail, as the state of New Hampshire still is unwilling to commit to funding it,” Gagne said.

Patrick Meighan can be reached at 594-6518 or pmeighan@nashuatelegraph.com.