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422 TOLLING STUDY APPROVED

By Keith Phucas, Journal Register News Service

NORRISTOWN — Montgomery County planners will receive \$15,833 to study how to turn Route 422 into a toll road in order to fund future highway construction and extend commuter rail service west of Norristown.



The feasibility study, which calls for extensive public outreach in order to build popular support, will cost about \$625,000. Federal funding will cover 80 percent of the cost, with 10 percent divided between Montgomery, Chester and Berks counties. The study is expected to take about 18 months.

In February, the Montgomery County Planning Commission completed the R6 Norristown Line Service Extension Study that offers three alternative plans to restore passenger rail along the 422 corridor in Montgomery, Chester, Berks and Philadelphia counties.

After Federal Transit Administration gave a thumbs down to the proposed \$2.2 billion Schuylkill Valley Metro rail project, the planning commission and Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission studied less expensive alternatives that could be funded by regional governments and organizations.

"We know if we raise money locally, we can spend it locally," said county planning commission Assistant Director Leo Bagley.

The high-end proposal for the R6 Norristown Line extension would provide electrified rail service between Wyomissing and Philadelphia's 30th Street Station, at an estimated cost of \$500,000.

By improving 422 and offering additional rail service, planners hope to reduce rush hour traffic congestion on the county highway and other adjacent roadways.

Bagley said the morning rush hour now begins at 5:30 a.m. on the highway.

"People are leaving earlier and earlier to get to work," he said. During the peak of rush hour, it takes cars 45 minutes to go 10 miles.

Collecting tolls would provide ready means of paying for the planned 422 corridor projects, whose funding would otherwise face a lengthy and uncertain fate in the state legislature, according to Bagley.

"One of the advantages of tolling is certainty," he said. "Right now, there is no certainty."

Bagley said he's received mostly positive feedback about the toll plan from area residents who visited www.r6extension.com and requested information and posted comments.

Though some have expressed reservations about making 422 a toll road, many clung to old notions about how the system would operate.

"People thought we were building a toll plaza," the planner said.

That isn't the case. Instead, planners envision electronic tolling similar to EZ Pass. In the 422 plan, devices affixed to a car's windshield would transmit information to toll cameras extending over the roadway, charging

transmit information to toll gantries extending over the roadway, charging a toll to a motorist's account. Cameras would snap pictures of license plates of cars without tolling devices, and those motorists would be billed by mail.

Tolls are estimated at 8 cents a mile similar to the Pennsylvania Turnpike's toll rate. A vehicle traveling the entire 25-mile length of 422 would pay about \$2.

Besides the Web site's Frequently Asked Questions link, the department also posted a "Response to Comments" link on the site in March that explains how the tolling would work.



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