



# IMPROVING CONNECTIONS:

A Look at the Challenges Faced Throughout the Development of the Norristown Transportation Center Parking Structure

**The Norristown Transportation Center,** in Norristown, PA serves the riders of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA). The center is a stop along numerous train and bus routes, bringing riders to and from Center City Philadelphia, and throughout the surrounding counties.

In 2002, the Borough of Norristown and SEPTA began to work together to improve the area around the existing Norristown Transportation Center which was originally opened in 1989. As a result of the increase

in transit ridership nationwide due to rising gas prices, the desire to avoid traffic, and commuting convenience, SEPTA implemented a plan to augment their existing bus and transportation facilities in Norristown with a new intermodal facility, including a 522 space parking structure and an intermodal facility and intercity bus terminal. This initiative was part of a capital investment program aimed at improving customer amenities throughout SEPTA's rail system.

At the same time, the Borough of Norris-

town had been actively pursuing a community-wide effort aimed at encouraging economic development and revitalization throughout the Borough. The new parking facility was envisioned to provide additional parking for transportation center commuters, as well as patrons visiting the Norristown Central Business District. A study was conducted to determine issues related to the development of the area around the transportation center, including widening Lafayette Street (which runs in front of the



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center), determining where a new parking structure could go and integrating the new structure into the area.

The study determined that a 140-space parking lot next to the station, including a parcel that had previously been occupied by a cookie factory, would be the lot provide adequate space to accommodate the required size of the facility. Further, the site was located in close proximity to the transportation center, providing easy access for commuters who would be utilizing the



garage. However, once the decision of where to place the new parking structure was made, a number of new issues were presented, creating a series of obstacles and project setbacks which needed to be addressed and overcome.

The first challenge was the need to accommodate Greyhound-type buses within the facility while at the same time allowing vehicles to circulate freely through the upper levels. The idea was to separate the bus traffic from the vehicular traffic within the garage. The team was able to design the structure to incorporate each of these features without sacrificing the economy and efficiency of the garage.

Another challenge posed during the project was the need to find a temporary area to locate displaced SEPTA parkers. The parking lot where the garage was to be constructed was the primary parking location for commuters using the Norristown Transportation Center. The lot was overflowing on a daily basis and displacing the 140 spaces would not only be extremely inconvenient for patrons, but it would also create chaos if sufficient parking was not provided nearby.

A number of options were considered to make up for the loss of parking during construction of the garage. One alternative included shuttling passengers from another

offsite location to the transportation center, although SEPTA found this option to be too expensive and inefficient. Another idea was to temporarily utilize parking lots at nearby locations throughout the neighborhood, but this option was deemed too inconvenient for commuters due to the increase in walking distance, particularly during the harsh weather months. Ultimately, the decision was made to utilize a gravel lot nearby, which happened to already be property owned by SEPTA, thereby making this option both economical and practical.

The gravel lot was bordered by streets on two sides; SEPTA train tracks on one side; and, a 20 foot elevated bike path on another. The bike path stood between the temporary lot and another parking lot belonging to a neighboring plumbing supply company. This created difficulty in determining how commuters would get from their vehicles to the station to board their train or bus.

Upon further investigation, the team discovered that there was actually a tunnel running underneath the elevated bike path. The tunnel, which connected the two lots, was being used as a storage area for the company next door. However, after a considerable amount of coordination, SEPTA was able to have the tunnel opened so that traffic could be directed into the company's parking lot



complete the construction. In addition, a smaller crane was brought in to install the façade, including the metal screens.

In spite of the many challenges and setbacks faced throughout design and construction, the Norristown Transportation Center parking structure was successfully completed. The new structure includes 522 new parking spaces which will serve SEPTA commuters, as well as patrons and workers of the downtown commercial business district. The garage also features a bus terminal, full fitted office space, and a drop-off and waiting area. Furthermore, the lower level of the structure was designed with ships for five buses so that an outside bus company could lease the space and utilize the transportation center as well.

These improvements have helped to

through the tunnel and into the temporary parking lot. This lot provided nearly 180 spaces for commuters and its location provided almost direct access to the nearby transportation center, as well as the platform.

Another issue which developed during the design of the new parking structure was the need to work with the Borough of Norristown and Montgomery County to design a façade that was acceptable to both Borough officials and the public. Some residents had concerns that the metal screening on the structure's façade looked too modern to fit in with the brick-accented historic feel of the rest of the Borough and a series of public meetings was held to discuss the façade design and integration of the new structure into the community.

The purpose of the meetings was to provide the public with a vision for how the new structure would be incorporated into the neighborhood while creating a more vibrant and unique look downtown. Although it was important that the parking structure be an attractive accent to the surrounding area, the design team felt that a more contemporary façade would be ideal given the Borough's efforts toward revitalization. Ultimately, both groups came to a compromise in which two sides of the structure featured the more modern look of the metal screens, and two sides featured the traditional brick façade.

Another setback encountered during the construction of the garage was that the footprint of the site was extremely tight, providing little room to maneuver the heavy equipment necessary during construction.



In addition, a strict regulation required that construction equipment be operated at a minimum of 30 feet from SEPTA's train tracks.

When construction began, this issue created few problems, as there was plenty of room for the large 350 ton crane to operate within the allowed parameters. However, once a significant portion of the garage was constructed, the crane no longer had room to move, and the project team needed to develop a solution so that the rest of the garage could be built and the façade added.

Fortunately, Borough officials were flexible and understanding throughout the situation. For three weeks, one lane of Lafayette Street running in front of the garage was closed and placed under police control. This allowed the crane to be moved into the street so that workers had adequate room to

establish the Norristown Transportation Center as a significant urban node, creating the potential for future public and private development. The construction of the new parking structure has resulted in an attractive and modern new landmark that will play an important role in the redevelopment and revitalization of Norristown and the surrounding community. ■

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