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# New Jersey Area Rising Around Transit Hub Lacks One Thing: Its Hub

By NICK CORASANITI MARCH 2, 2017

NORTH BRUNSWICK, N.J. — All the ingredients for a bustling downtown transit hub here are coming together: new townhouses, restaurants and big-box stores sit just off the busiest rail corridor in the country, as trains whiz by every 10 minutes or so. Bulldozers, backhoes and scattered mounds of dirt offer evidence of more to come. A large banner over a nearby highway with an illustration of a train declares: “Shop. Dine. Ride. Live.”

There is just one piece missing from this rosy picture: any evidence of a train station.

On the longest stretch of passenger rails in New Jersey without a stop, the proposed station would address a glaring need, providing public transit to a bustling area and easing congestion on chronically gridlocked highways. An elevated rail track that is part of the project could funnel more commuter trains to New York City.

But after being unveiled with great fanfare four years ago, the project’s future is unclear. New Jersey Transit, which operates the state’s sprawling rail network, said recently that no funding was available so far for the plan.

The plight of the North Brunswick train station illustrates the complications and challenges of completing even a modest infrastructure project at a time of growing concern about the creaky conditions of the country's aging rails, bridges and roads. And it is yet another challenge for New Jersey Transit, the nation's third-busiest commuter railroad, which is already plagued by delays, packed trains, broken equipment and concerns over safety after a fatal crash last year. The station was included as part of an ambitious \$120 billion proposal by the Federal Railroad Administration to overhaul the Northeast Corridor, the most heavily traveled stretch of rail in the United States.

For those living in what has essentially become a train station desert, traveling is often an aggravating slog.

"Right now, it's an hour and a half minimum getting to New York from my home in North Brunswick," said Jaideep Desai, 50, who works as a project manager in New York City. He moved here from Jersey City after his daughter was born for more space and to keep his commute manageable. But without the new station, which promised a commute time of under an hour for the roughly 40-mile journey to the city, Mr. Desai must sit in traffic-clogged back streets as he wends his way to the closest train stop in New Brunswick.

In 2013, Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican, proclaimed that he was "proud" to authorize the project, a notable endorsement from a governor who at times has been lukewarm toward public transportation. New Jersey Transit entered into an agreement with a private developer, which would construct a neighborhood of commercial and residential buildings anchored by a train station. The developer would also erect the station building, while the transit agency would build the platforms.

The station is part of a related project to build what the agency calls the Mid-Line Loop, an elevated track near the new station that would improve service between New York and New Jersey by allowing trains to turn around at North Brunswick rather than having to travel further south to Trenton. It would help relieve congestion along the crowded Northeast Corridor, which is shared by New Jersey Transit and Amtrak. No construction has started on this project, either.

The building of the platforms was supposed to have begun this month and the station was to be completed by the end of next year.

“If they’ve not started by now, it’s probably at least another five years before it gets opened, and that’s frustrating, you know?” said Chris Cohen, 28, a New Jersey Transit rider who lives in nearby Highland Park, as he sat at the bar at the newly opened Greene Turtle. A window offered a perfect view of a mound of dirt where the train station would be.

Agency officials insist that they remain committed to building the station as well as the elevated tracks, but a spokeswoman, Lisa Torbic, said last month that “neither project is included in our current capital program, nor do they have funding.”

The delay is a result, in part, of the nature of public financing for infrastructure projects. Multiyear, multimillion-dollar projects can be upended by annual budget constraints, especially in a financially squeezed state like New Jersey. So even when an agreement is reached and money is set aside for initial work, like designs and engineering, a project can be stopped if financing dries up or needs to be directed to more pressing issues.

“It is important to understand that capital plans adapt to current situations and to meet priority safety, state of good repair and operational needs,” Ms. Torbic said in a statement.

The project first appeared on the New Jersey Transit capital plan for 2014. In the years since, as private developers have been digging and hammering, the agency has been hit by a number of problems, including rampant power failures in summer 2015 and a fatal train crash in Hoboken in 2016. The depletion of the state’s Transportation Trust Fund, which is used to finance highway and public transit projects, prompted squabbling between the Legislature and the governor, who ultimately agreed to raise the state’s gas tax to replenish the fund. And under Mr. Christie’s administration, New Jersey Transit’s state subsidy has plunged by more than 90 percent.

With the agency struggling simply to keep its existing transportation system in good working order, more ambitious projects like a new train station have been

pushed to the side. In the meantime, however, construction continues to carve out a neighborhood that was meant to be transit-friendly.

“It’s probably the first question they ask: ‘Hey, I heard you guys were building a train, what can you tell me about it?’” said Thomas Spiess, the general sales manager for the Northeast Corridor for Pulte Group, the company building and selling townhouses here.

The development sits on a 212-acre site that was once occupied by Johnson & Johnson. It was bought in 2006 by North Brunswick T.O.D. Associates, a developer leading the effort to transform the aging commercial and industrial property into a new downtown in this town of 42,000 residents better known for its strip malls than its Main Street.

Designed to be more sustainable than the suburban sprawl that spawned the subdivisions and behemoth concrete corporate campuses that lie along the state’s highways, the North Brunswick downtown aims to concentrate more than 1,800 housing units, restaurants, a hotel and stores within a smaller footprint with short, walkable commutes to a rail station. So far, 158 townhouses are under construction and a sign at the leasing center trumpets “25 new homeowners in the past 60 days.”

Residents have already moved into townhouses. Target and Costco have been open for months. The foundation has been laid for a new Courtyard Marriott. And the beer taps at the Greene Turtle, the area’s first major restaurant, started flowing last month.

While developers remain optimistic that a train station will one day stand here, the flurry of construction and the signs of an increasingly vibrant neighborhood aggravate frustrations over the absence of any progress.

“We’ve been waiting a long time,” Mr. Cohen said.

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