

Next stop: 2nd train station for Bridgeport?

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BRIDGEPORT -- Building a second train station on the city's East Side is not only feasible, but could serve as an important catalyst to revitalize two low-income neighborhoods with more than 700 acres of vacant and under-utilized land.

Getting to that point, though, will require lots of time, money and infrastructure changes. Most notably, city streets would have to be realigned and tunnels would have to be carved in the railroad's stone viaduct.

That's what local residents, stakeholders and officials were told Thursday during back-to-back meetings of committees formed to help draft a feasibility study for a proposed P.T. Barnum Station on a 7-acre parcel on Barnum Avenue.

"We feel pretty confident you can put a (Metro-North) station here and it will work," said Ken Schwartz, principal and director of planning for Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc., a Massachusetts-based planning and engineering firm.

The study is being funded by a regional \$3.5 million Sustainable Communities grant. VHB was given the task of determining whether a station could fit, be viable and successful on city-owned land at 812 Barnum Ave., part of the former RemGrit site adjacent to the railroad.

The site, which the city obtained by foreclosure, lies within walking distance of the East Side and East End neighborhoods, both of which lack major developments, but not vacant land, run-down factories and construction yards.

David Kooris, the city's economic development director, said creating a second transportation-oriented district -- apart from the one that exists downtown -- could be an incentive for job creation on lower Seaview Avenue, the General Electric Co. on Boston Avenue and the Lake Success site above that.

It could also aid in Bridgeport Hospital's plans for expansion. Hospital officials at the meeting expressed interest in the plan.

One issue that wasn't addressed in the meetings was the source of funding for the station project, including the cost of remediating the property.

Kooris said the city won't be in a position to begin making decisions on what to build and what funding to pursue until the feasibility study is completed next month.

In the short term, the city is moving forward with plans to demolish the vacant buildings on the site, which abuts the lower Pembroke lake.

A request for proposals will go out soon and demolition could begin by summer. The city has \$1 million in state funds on hand and another \$1.5 million already approved, Kooris said.

Mike Lambert, mid-Atlantic transit and rail director for VHB, said preliminary rider models indicate the downtown station wouldn't lose its rider base. Plus, it could attract riders on a waiting list for parking at the Stratford train station.

Lambert said the Barnum station would likely work best for local stops -- not express trains to New York -- and could accommodate up to 10 trains in morning and afternoon peak hours.

East End resident Vanessa Liles said the station could serve as a great mode of transportation to jobs in nearby towns for Bridgeport young people without cars. Liles was the only person to raise concerns about the impact of neighborhood crime on the station.

That issue has yet to be fully explored, said Brian Bidolli, executive director of the Greater Bridgeport Regional Council. He said the station could possibly aid in the reduction of crime by bringing in more people, better lighting and more development.

Peter Hance, of the Bridgeport Housing Authority, said the agency plans to build housing on the adjacent property, formerly the Father Panik complex. He assured Liles that the BHA had learned from its mistakes and would only pursue mixed-income developments on the site.

Officials also heard Thursday about different street alignment options to make the station more accessible to pedestrians, riders and public buses, including the extension of Helen Street or Waterview Avenue and realigning Church Street and Crescent Avenue. The latter street would have to be moved at least 90 feet to the south in any scenario to make room for a southern platform.

Bidolli said connecting East Washington Avenue to Barnum Avenue would also strengthen regional plans to create express bus service linking Stratford to Fairfield.

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