



HOW LOW CAN THE ELEVATED TAKE US?

WEST PHILA. SUFFERS TWICE: SEPTA CONSTRUCTION AND POLITICAL RED TAPE

LAST MONTH, a group of transportation and economic experts chose the Cira Centre to release a major study on how the city has failed to capitalize on transit-oriented development in building communities.

Proponents of transit-oriented development maintain that investing in transit-line improvements and smart development near transit stops can stimulate economic growth in communities.

These experts - which included Dr. Richard Voith, of Econsult, the author of the study - held their news conference at the Cira Centre because that complex, hovering over 30th Street Station, represents a good example of such development: a high-density, pedestrian-friendly hub of jobs, retail and transportation.

Too bad they didn't move the event 20 or 30 blocks west, to the wasteland that is Market West. That would have been a more dramatic example of what the city's failure looks like.

Market Street between 43rd and 63rd streets is a particularly miserable tale. In the nearly five years that SEPTA has been rebuilding the elevated tracks, 50 businesses have been shuttered. The construction is a year behind schedule.

And as reported by *Daily News* Urban Warrior Chris Brennan this week, while \$2.5 million has reportedly been raised from federal, state and local sources to help the business corridor, only a fraction of that money has made its way to those who need it most. The money dangles cruelly out of reach of the people whose lives have been derailed by the SEPTA construction.

That money includes \$750,000 in city money that Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell secured; \$130,000 is still unspent.

State Sen. Vincent Hughes secured \$600,000 from the state Department of Community and Economic

Development; \$500,000 is still sitting there. U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah added more than \$1 million in federal money; so far, none has been spent.

The Philadelphia Commercial Development Corp., the city nonprofit agency that would dispense this money, has not succeeded either in shaking the dollars loose or in making anyone care about the decline of this community.

Why? How many ways can you spell "bureaucratic red tape"?

But clues to the real answer can be found in the transit report, which maintains repeatedly that collaboration among agencies, communities and government is key to stimulating development.

The city and SEPTA enjoy chilly relations and aren't exactly in a collaborative mood.

And while SEPTA held community meetings prior to reconstruction of the El, so far all the players - from federal, state and local government, SEPTA and the business owners - have yet to meet, at least as a group.

The balkanization of government is unfortunately all too familiar in this town; too many agencies get to pass the blame around, and no one is made to take full responsibility.

The tragedy of Market West is that its decline was avoidable. After all, try to imagine the construction of the new Comcast tower effectively shutting down Center City commerce and creating a ghost town of boarded-up stores.

That wouldn't be allowed to happen.

So why have we allowed it to happen in West Philadelphia?

Among the recommendations in the transit report that makes sense: The new mayor should appoint a transportation director who can make sure the city doesn't blow the opportunities that our massive transit system provides.

Maybe that person can stand up for the victims of the SEPTA construction project, and finally make someone care enough to fix it. *

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