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LANSDALE - GROWTH AT THE TRAIN STATIONS

Lansdale is experiencing growth near its train stations and this growth is considered key to the Borough's future, according to a recent *Philadelphia Inquirer* story, shown below. RT was pleased to be a part of the start of this, completing two projects, one known as Station Square involving redevelopment of a former Philco Ford manufacturing site near the Pennbrook Train Station in the southern part of Lansdale. The second redevelopment site, nearby was part of a Governor's Initiative to bring more jobs to the Lansdale area.

In addition to being a key part of redevelopment, a key investor for Station Square was one of the State Employee's Pension Funds. The *Inquirer* article follows.

Lansdale on track with growth

By Jason Laughlin



Michael Bryant/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Riders make their way to the northbound SEPTA train at the Lansdale Station on Main Street. Three years ago, SEPTA refurbished the station, and since then the area around it has blossomed with new businesses such as coffee shops and a farmers market.

The Black Reserve Bookstore is about a block from Lansdale's century-old train station and down an enclosed alley that had been part of a Main Street car dealership.

It's a small space saturated with aromatic incense and offering James Baldwin poetry, Black Panther graphic novels by Ta-nehisi Coates, and children's stories about brown-skinned kids.

"You do not see black children's books," said Anwar Muhammad, who opened the shop in August. "That is like a unicorn."

Along nearby Madison Street, construction crews erect steel girders around cinder block towers that will become elevator shafts. Delaware County developer Equus Capital Partners is building 181 apartments and 17,500 square feet of retail space next to the Regional Rail stop. Philadelphia is in one direction on the tracks, Doylestown in the other.

"Any experienced real estate developer in the last five years or so has intuitively woken up to the fact that a transit-oriented development is a good thing," said Greg Curci, CEO of Madison Apartment Group, the branch of Equus that handles rental properties. "It's an amenity you can't easily replicate anywhere. I can't build a train station."

Lansdale, a Montgomery County borough of about 16,000, exists because of the railroad. When the North Penn Railroad was laying tracks from the city to the Lehigh Valley, Doylestown insisted on a spur, and that junction opened in 1856 in what today is Lansdale.

Muhammad's bookstore and Equus' nascent apartment complex hint at a new Lansdale in the making, but the train station remains a key asset.

"We've leaned into who we are, which is a transportation hub, or a transportation center," said Mayor Garry Herbert Jr., who sees transit-oriented development as the borough's future.

He said the developments - high density, often mixed-use projects within walking distance of a transportation hub - are designed to draw newly married couples or new parents who aren't interested in living in the city but still want some urban elements, including walkability and easy travel to Philadelphia's attractions. Transit access, ideally, uncouples people from car ownership and reduces traffic congestion and pollution.

SEPTA wants to encourage transit-oriented development as a boost to the regional economy, and its own ridership, though it is more likely to assist by upgrading its own facilities than by getting directly involved in a development, said Jeff Knueppel, the agency's general manager.

"People think about us being able to run trains," he said. "I honestly believe that our role is to also spur economic development where it makes sense."

These kinds of developments can also generate revenue for the towns, with density increasing the tax revenue generated per acre and proximity to transit increasing the value of properties. SEPTA recently reported that buyers were willing to pay an additional \$17,300 to \$46,600 in some communities for a home with easy transit access.

In the last decade, Lansdale has completed five transit-oriented developments near the station. With the Madison Street project scheduled to begin welcoming tenants in early 2019, the borough will have created more than 560 residential units, including townhouses and loft apartments.

The median home value in Lansdale is \$232,900, according to the real estate site Zillow, and median rent is \$1,576.

The influx of people has attracted new kinds of businesses to a Main Street that still harbors mainstays such as a hardware store and a vacuum repair shop. An upscale pub, gourmet coffee shop, and a store

that allows customers to make their own colognes and lotions have, along with Muhammad's book store, opened within walking distance of the station.



Michael Bryant

Jen Burnley opened her business, Scent & Sip, about a year and a half ago on Main Street near the refurbished train station. You can make a signature fragrance and scented items while you drink your favorite BYO beverage.



Michael Bryant.

A development of townhouses called Cannon Square has been built a few blocks from the Lansdale train station just off Main Street.

Developers see similar promise elsewhere along the 153-stop Regional Rail network tying Philadelphia to six surrounding counties in three states.

"We have one of the most extraordinary public transportation networks in America," said Jason Duckworth, president of Arcadia Land Co. "What's a crime is we've allowed so much of our growth to occur inaccessible to our transit system."

Of 225 multifamily transit-oriented developments constructed in the region from 2007 to 2017, just 14 percent were built outside Philadelphia, according to the CoStar Commercial Real Estate Database.

Population growth in the Delaware Valley has been slow, and Philadelphia's suburbs have fragmented land ownership and use, said Andrew Svekla, associate manager for smart growth for the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC).

Suburban communities also have "a reputation of being hostile to density," Duckworth said.

Lansdale, however, has had some of the most robust transit-oriented development in the region outside of Philadelphia, according to data from the DVRPC. That's due, in part, to the importance of the station itself. It's the eighth busiest on the Regional Rail network, with more than 2,500 riders each workday, SEPTA data show. An additional 300 take one of the two bus routes that stop there. The trip to Center City takes about an hour.

"Change is coming to Lansdale," Herbert said. "Maintaining it as a town built around its train and built around transportation, we really have to find a way to embrace that change."

In the last 10 years, the borough worked closely with developers and SEPTA to create a denser, more walkable downtown.

In the case of Cannon Square, a 28-townhouse development that opened in 2012, that meant speeding the approval process.

"A process that can take two or three years took six to eight months," said Chris Canavan, vice president for land acquisition at W.B. Homes, which developed the site.

For the Madison Street development, it meant coordinating with SEPTA and some creative revamping of zoning and building regulations.

The development is being constructed where a surface parking lot had been. SEPTA added value to the site by replacing the surface lot with a 680-spot, \$35 million parking garage and overpass adjacent to the Madison Street lot. SEPTA made sure construction was finished in 2017, before work on the apartments began. It also spent \$2.6 million on a new train platform that opened in 2016 at Ninth Street, its first in 20 years, which itself may become a catalyst for development, Knueppel said.

The borough also gave Equus incentives through flexible zoning that allowed increased density, said Borough Manager John Ernst, and allowed the developer to exceed the area's height requirement by 20 feet in exchange for Equus including trails and public plazas in the development. The borough wanted a development that matched the downtown feel of Main Street, Ernst said, and required some of the buildings have retail space on the first floor, and limited parking spaces to 1.2 per unit.

The developments have attracted businesses that previously might have been more at home in Philadelphia neighborhoods.

"There's no other coffee shop in town that prepared and presented coffee the way we wanted to," said Matt Adams, a Lansdale resident who opened Backyard Bean Coffee Co. on Main Street in 2017.

Yet a transit-centered Lansdale still faces challenges.

Ninety-five percent of Lansdale's residents still drive to work, according to the real estate website Trulia. There's still a peppering of empty storefronts on Lansdale's downtown. And parking is an issue.

"This isn't a walking town yet," said Jen Burnley, who owns Scent & Sip, where visitors can mix their own scents. "That's one of the reasons for me for the investment in Lansdale, because I think we could get there."

Muhammad, the bookstore owner, notes the growing diversity in the area. According to the U.S. Census, Lansdale's black population has more than doubled since 2000, to about 1,400 people.

The developer behind the Madison Street apartments, thinks other towns will follow Lansdale's transit-oriented lead.

"I can tell you we're looking at every train station on the network and trying to figure out how we can do more projects," Curci said.

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