

Absecon seeking Transit Village status as boost for downtown

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ABSECON — People who catch the Atlantic City Rail Line here almost always drive to the train station.

But city officials hope more people will soon live close enough to walk — safely — across the White Horse Pike to the station, according to officials seeking status for Absecon as a Transit Village.

“We have just started the application,” said Mayor Kim Horton. “Our goal is that people can live, shop and play without relying on automobiles ... and to revitalize downtown.”

Becoming a transit village gives a town access to more state funding for streetscaping and other improvements to promote construction of higher-density housing and commercial space.

But first the city has to come up with a plan for where higher-density development can go, and how to provide safe access to cyclists and pedestrians to the station, said Jim Rutala, Absecon’s consultant on the application.

Pleasantville is currently the only town with that designation in southeastern New Jersey, and Atlantic City is also seeking it, said state Sen. Chris Brown, R-Atlantic. He’d also like to see Egg Harbor City and Hammonton, which also have train stations, consider applying.

Pleasantville got a \$400,000 Transit Village grant last year to improve its Main Street pedestrian infrastructure, including to replace curbs and sidewalks and to install LED lighting, brick crosswalks, ramps and bike racks, and signage to the Bus Terminal.

Brown is sponsoring the “New Jersey Transit Villages Act” (S-2483) to encourage development around and ridership along the Atlantic City Rail Line, he said.

The bill would increase funding to \$10 million a year for Transit Village projects. Funding has been closer to about \$1 million a year. It also would give Transit Village communities priority in other types of state funding, including from the Economic Development Authority.

“The Atlantic City Rail Line is a tremendous asset for our working families and local businesses, but we have yet to fully tap its potential,” Brown said. “My goals are to increase service to Atlantic City during special events, improve the commuter schedule and now use the train stations along the rail line as centers for redevelopment.”

Brown’s bill is awaiting consideration in the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee.

On Tuesday afternoon, Sonny Obianyo, 56, of Cherry Hill, was waiting for a train to take him from Absecon to Atlantic City. He visits friends in Absecon about once a month using the train, he said, and he walks about a mile from the station to their home and back.

“It’s a good idea,” he said of the Transit Village application. “It would give people incentive to move down here.”

But longtime Absecon native James Holland, who is now a resident of Pompano Beach, Florida, was more skeptical.

Shopping centers and malls hurt the Absecon downtown, he said. And a streetscape project about five years ago that took away parking on one side of New Jersey Avenue, the main street in town, killed many of the businesses that were left, Holland said. He doesn’t see a way to coax people back to town to shop.

Downtown now is a mix of vacant storefronts and surviving businesses like Lee’s Nails. Owner Donna Lee, who also owns Bijou Nails on Station Avenue, said business is good. She just purchased the building next to Lee’s Nails on New Jersey Avenue and will move Lee’s Nails into it at the end of the year, she said.

But she would also welcome more customers, she said.

In Absecon, the first step in the process of becoming a Transit Village just happened. Horton, members of City Council and the administration had an initial meeting with the state Department of Transportation, which oversees the program.

“Now we are starting to put together the application,” said Rutala, considering how to provide for higher-density development around the train station.

“We’re just starting the process. We haven’t looked into sites yet,” Rutala said.

Another major aspect of the plan is providing better access to the train station for walkers and cyclists, Rutala said. He has applied on the city’s behalf to have the DOT do a citywide bike and pedestrian plan at no cost to the city.

At the DOT meeting, Horton said the city broached the topic of a pedestrian bridge linking the train station to downtown over the busy White Horse Pike. That would allow train riders to safely walk to and from downtown, whether they live there or are just visiting for a meal.

“It was well received, we were happy to hear,” Horton said.

Horton said it’s the way of the future.

“Young people don’t necessarily want an automobile,” she said.

At another meeting between local leaders and NJ Transit, the group discussed how to continue to grow the Atlantic City Rail Line, said Brown, who arranged the meeting.

“Two of the goals we discussed were creating transit villages and making sure projects for the Atlantic City Rail Line were included in the five-year capital plan that NJ Transit is currently working on,” he said.

One of Brown’s goals is getting express trains that can take people between Atlantic City and Philadelphia in about an hour.

“If you can have quality of life living near the beach and getting to work in an hour, it’s worth it,” said Brown. “It takes 1 hour and 20 minutes right now. We are looking at ways to reduce that.”

