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Fort Washington Office Park Transportation Demand Management Plan

Focus Group Session

Final Report, 1/27/2017

Prepared by GVF



INTRODUCTION

Upper Dublin Township in partnership with the Greater Valley Forge Transportation Management Association (GVF) and Wells & Associates is working on completing the Transportation Demand Management (TDM) Plan for the Fort Washington Office Park. The plan is being funded through the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission's (DVRPC) Transportation and Community Development Initiative grant program.

As part of the Office Park revitalization efforts, the TDM Plan goal is to provide Upper Dublin Township with strategies and policies to make Fort Washington Office Park an accessible, sustainable, and multi-modal use park. This is an effort to meet the needs of existing employers, attract new employers, and accommodate the expected residential growth within the Office Park.

The Office Park is an economic and employment hub for the Greater Philadelphia region. Established in the 1950's, it is comprised of 123 properties within 536 acres and has over 8,000 employees. Like many older industrial parks throughout the nation, Fort Washington Office Park has seen significant decline as it tries to attract an untraditional workforce and remain competitive in a diversifying business market.

The existing base of businesses includes a diverse mix of industries. Financial services, technology and pharmaceutical industries are well represented. In the past, representatives of several large employers have expressed interest in improvements to transportation modes and connections to remain competitive in their labor markets.

As part of the TDM plan, the township is trying to better understand the existing conditions within the park as seen by employers, employees, and property owners. The background research for the TDM plan consists of analysis of data collected via surveys designed to be taken by the Office Park property owners, employers, and employees; an informative stakeholder meeting; focus group session for major employers in the Park; personal interviews; and evaluation of geographical location, demographics, and existing physical infrastructure of the Office Park.

This report summarizes the findings of the focus group session held on January 12, 2017.

METHODOLOGY

Upper Dublin Township in partnership with GVF has organized a focus group session to give an opportunity to major Office Park employers to be engaged in the development of the TDM Plan and provide critical feedback on current transportation conditions and opportunities within the Office Park.

The Focus Group Session was held on January 12th at the Upper Dublin Township. The main stakeholders in the Park – employers with the most number of employees - from various business sectors were invited. Attendees included nine representatives from Nutrisystem, FedEx, Ditech Financial, Impax Laboratories, Freedom Mortgage, and McMahon Associates. In addition, DVRPC and Montgomery County were in attendance to observe and provide additional information and input.

Ashley Nuckles, TDM Manager of GVF, provided information related to TDM and the plan development, as well as, the importance of Office Park stakeholder participation.

Rob Henry, Director of GVF, facilitated the meeting that was designed in a strategy known as SOAR. SOAR is a framework for identifying Strengths, defining Opportunities, outlining Aspirations, and analyzing Results for planning a more comprehensive future. The group were asked specific questions that relate to the Office Park, their business strategies, and employees. Every individual was given a chance to participate in answering specific questions. All the answers were presented in front of the group for an open discussion.

The focus group discussion resulted in identifying benefits of the Office Park, opportunities for changes and potential projects. Furthermore, some of the companies were made aware of the existing projects being implemented in the Park.

Questions that were asked include the following:

Strengths

Question: Name 3 benefits of having your business located in the Fort Washington Office Park.

Opportunities

Question 1: Name 3 transportation improvements that can be made in the park to make it more accessible and attractive for employees, new businesses and/or goods movement.

Question 2: Name 3 ways you believe technology like on demand services (Uber, Lyft), innovative transportation options (autonomous vehicles, telework) and changes in the workforce will impact your company.

Aspirations

Question 1: If there were no financial constraints, what 2 transportation projects do you believe would be transformative for your company?

Question 2: If there were no financial constraints, what do you believe would be transformative for the Office Park?



FINDINGS

The following section will discuss the outcome of the group discussion for each question. It will identify those outcomes that were most cited and/or considered a priority by attendees. For all responses provided please see Appendix A, Tables 1 through 5.

Strengths

Question: Name 3 benefits of having your business located in the Fort Washington Office Park.

The group agreed that the Fort Washington Office Park provides major benefits to their companies and employees. The following were the most cited responses. Table 1 in the Appendix cites all responses received.

Central Location: Main reasons why companies have chosen to locate in the park are its geographic relevance to their other offices, proximity to other states, access to major roadways, and proximity to the City of Philadelphia.

- **Turnpike Access:** The Office Park is located directly off the Pennsylvania Turnpike (I-276), which provides easy access to commuters travelling from Philadelphia area and surrounding suburbs. Also, the turnpike is a major freight route and the proximity to industries utilizing freight services is a great benefit, including decreased final mile travel by tractor trailers.
- **Recruitment Pool:** The Office Park's convenient location to the Turnpike and other major roadways enable businesses located there to recruit from a larger pool of applicants who commute from Philadelphia, suburbs, and even other states. In addition, the Office Park is served by SEPTA Regional Rail and bus lines that make the park a viable option for those who would prefer alternative modes, such as millennials, or those who do not own a car.

Access to Amenities: Within the Office Park, there are several restaurants, hotels, health and wellness services, child care providers, and retail stores. Employers specifically cited the Office Park's proximity to the Willow Grove Mall. The Mall is approximately 4 miles away, and is easily accessible by several roadways.

Company Growth: The amount of physical space available in the Office Park allows for businesses to expand their footprint and grow their employee base. Currently there is extensive on-site parking that is underutilized and can be redeveloped for more office space to accommodate company growth if needed.

Opportunities

Question 1: *Name 3 transportation improvements that can be made in the park to make it more accessible and attractive for employees, new businesses and/or goods movement*

Focus Group participants agreed that there are transportation improvements needed within the Park to make it more accessible and attractive for their employees and potential tenants. The following were the most cited responses. Table 2 in the Appendix cites all responses received.

Improve Connection to Fort Washington Train Station: Participants agreed that there is a need for a better connection to the Fort Washington Train Station that is in the southwestern corner of the Office Park. Currently, those who work nearby and commute by train can either bike or use existing sidewalks to walk to the train station. Those who work at companies located further away from the station can also bike, take a SEPTA bus or utilize a shuttle if provided by their employer.

However, most of the roadways within the Office Park are not accommodating to bicyclists. There are portions of the sidewalks that are disconnected and non-ADA compliant, which can be a barrier for some people who want to walk to the train station. Participants also cited several issues with SEPTA bus routes, including limited night and weekend service and inconvenient stop locations and/or lack of bus shelters in case of inclement weather. Two participants directly cited their company's being impacted by the limited service due to untraditional work hours. Shuttle services to/from the train station were discussed as an opportunity, with only one company from those in attendance providing such benefit to its employees.

Improve Turnpike Access: Focus Group expressed their support for an eastbound access to the Turnpike (slip ramp) to minimize traffic congestion and improve commute times. Participants shared their experience with traffic congestion at peak hours, and believe having direct access to I-276 east would save time and reduce congestion.

Develop an Interconnected Trail System: Participants would like to see an interconnected trail system with the Office Park that would make walking and biking a viable means of transportation to access amenities currently offered and planned throughout the Park. In addition, they would like to see the trail system provide access to the Fort Washington Train Station.

Improve Pedestrian and Bicycle Amenities: Focus Group participants suggested several improvements to accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists within the Office Park, including well-maintained sidewalks, bike lanes, lighting along the walkways, and improved pedestrian crossings.

Improve Overall Aesthetics: Participants agreed that the Office Park can be more visual and physically appealing. Some of the suggestions included: better lit pedestrian facilities, well-lit parking lots, better designed streets with trees and street lights, better designed parking lot layouts and improved signage within the Park.

Bring Desirable Amenities: The Office Park already offers various amenities mentioned previously; however, participants suggested additional ones that have been voiced at their companies as desirable, such as services within walking distance (restaurants, post office), and dry cleaning. In fact, the quantity and variety of restaurants within walking distance is one of the top improvements companies would like to see implemented within the Park.

Better Communication Strategy: During the discussion, it became apparent that some employers within the Office Park are not fully aware of nearby amenities, transportation options and/or the Township's initiatives. One participant suggested for such information to be available through an Office Park newsletter. Other companies agreed that it would be a great resource that could be used to disseminate information to their employees internally. Some of the proposed information for the newsletter includes carpooling and ridesharing. Additionally, there was some discussion of a mobile App that could provide real time information on public transit, ridesharing and other transportation options within the Park.

Question 2: *Name 3 ways you believe technology like on demand services (Uber, Lyft), innovative transportation options (autonomous vehicles, telework) and changes in the workforce will impact your company*

As anticipated, the Focus Group participants had a difficult time answering this question. The question had the fewest responses, however, participants agreed that innovative on demand services (UBER, Lyft) and groundbreaking transportation options (autonomous vehicles, telework) impact and will continue to impact their businesses in various ways. The following were the most cited responses. Table 3 in the Appendix cites all responses received.

Flexible Schedule/Teleworking: Some industries within the Office Park have an opportunity to provide teleworking benefits to their employees to reduce and even eliminate their commute to work. However, several industries require employees to be on site during work hours, and/or to travel for business. Participants agreed that innovative technology makes it easier for an employer to offer flexible scheduling and telework options. One company in the focus group has a teleworking program in place.

Real-time applications: Participants agreed that there are many real-time traffic information applications beneficial to commuters. Some suggested the development and implementation of an office park carpooling program with a Mobile App that can allow employees from different companies located in the Office Park to share rides.

Reduced physical space needs: One of the main findings of the group is that innovative technology has decreased company's need for parking space. Flexible schedule, teleworking, diversity of commuting options (on-demand services, public transit, shuttles) provide opportunity for employees not to own a personal vehicle. That in return has an impact on the amount of parking needed and the cost of parking maintenance. This could eventually allow the park to accommodate growth where parking currently exists.

Aspirations

Question 1: *If there were no financial constraints, what 2 transportation projects do you believe would be transformative for your company?*

Finding and securing funding for any initiative can be difficult, timely and expensive. The following questions looked to understand if priority projects would change if there were no financial limitations. The following were the most cited responses. Table 4 in the Appendix cites all responses received.

Turnpike Improvements: Participants identified the Eastbound EZPass Slip ramp as a main priority. In addition to a slip ramp, one participant suggested adding a 4th lane on the turnpike and another participant suggested a high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane for carpoolers.

On Demand Transportation Services: Organized ridesharing between different companies within the Office Park has been suggested and supported by many participants. Many businesses share their office space, which creates an opportunity to create a partnering rideshare program.

Shuttle Services: Companies recognize that there is a need for shuttle services to/from the Fort Washington Train Station. As previously mentioned, only one company from the group's participants provides this benefit to their employees.

Public Transit: Participants expressed their support to improve public transit services within the Office Park for all transit options, such as accommodating train/bus schedule and run times, bus stops at each business locations, and an easy access to schedule information. After hours and weekend SEPTA bus services within the Park will accommodate employees working flexible schedule, including third shift.

Question 2: *If there were no financial constraints, what do you believe would be transformative for the Office Park?*

Focus Group participants agreed that the park would need to become more mixed-use to continue to attract and retain employees. To remain competitive, they felt the park should offer more amenities and residential housing. This will allow the Office Park to become a place where employees can live, work and play. Table 5 in the Appendix cites all responses received.

Mixed-Use Development:

- **Residential development:** Companies would like to see an opportunity for their employees to live nearby and walk to work.
- **Increased Amenities:** Participants strongly called for diversity of amenities within the Park to make it more appealing to employees and businesses. Suggested services include:
 - Food Options: Increased food options in walking distance was a common priority. Restaurants were most desirable, but food courts were also mentioned.
 - Day to Day Business Activities: Postal office, FedEx drop off location, laundromat, ATM
 - Shopping: Stores within walking distance

Aesthetics: Focus Group felt strongly about making various improvements to the overall Office Park, including directional signage for visitors and better lighting in parking lots and along existing sidewalks and trails.

SUMMARY

Overall, participating companies believe they benefit from being located at the Fort Washington Office Park. They are confident that it is a strategic location that provides easy access and amenities for their employees and makes them competitive in their market. Furthermore, they believe that the Office Park has an opportunity to improve and to attract other businesses.

Based on Focus Group responses from the major companies located in the Office park, most businesses are car-oriented. However, the participating businesses were receptive to transportation alternative options; to supporting the Office Park TDM Plan development and implementation; and to potentially providing some alternative transportation options to their employees.

An eastbound EZPass slip ramp, better connection to the Fort Washington train station, multi-modal improvements, aesthetics, more amenities, and mixed use land development are main projects companies would like to see developed and implemented in the Park. Furthermore, participants are in support of utilizing innovative technology and on-demand transportation services and potentially organizing a ridesharing program within the Park.

The information collected during the Focus Group will be used in the development of the TDM Plan to identify clear goals and measures for success. The data will be compared to the information collected through the surveys to ensure consistency, or identify variations.

Appendix

Participant Responses

The following tables depict the responses as transcribed by the attendees.

Table 1: Strengths

Question: Name 3 benefits of having your business located in the Fort Washington Office Park
Proximity to some stores, restaurants, Willow Grove Mall
Getting to work; westbound turnpike slip ramp at Virginia Drive
Accessibility to Turnpike
Good compromise for employers finally located in Horsham/Chalfont
Helps with recruitment
Ability to draw employees from multiple states and municipalities due to turnpike
Close to many amenities
Turnpike Access
Safety
On-site Parking
Location (in PA)
Our space allows for growth
Other call center operations in area
Turnpike
Central location for our service area
Easy Access for tractor trailer
Access to Turnpike
Closeness to Willow Grove shopping
Many back roads
Easy access to/from Turnpike
Close to rail station
Centrally located in region for employees

Table 2: Opportunities, Question 1

Name 3 transportation improvements that can be made in the park to make it more accessible and attractive for employees, new businesses and/or goods movement
More transit service from area to regional rail station
Full trail system linking entire office park with widen sidewalks
Bike lanes
Eastbound access to PA turnpike at Virginia Drive
Better parking layout in our complex
Traffic flow
Addition slip ramp
Slip ramp eastbound
Better lighting in parking lots
More restaurants you can walk to
More work from home
More automation of work (smaller workforce?)
Carpool, ride sharing made easier via an app or some sort of tech
Eastbound slip ramp from turnpike
Shuttle to trains
Increase recruitment pool of quality candidates
Promote work/life balance
Increase productive time
Easy pass other direction
More shuttle service
Office park newsletter offering rideshare, carpool, etc.

Table 3: Opportunities, Question 2

Name 3 ways you believe technology like on demand services (Uber, Lyft), innovative transportation options (autonomous vehicles, telework) and changes in the workforce will impact your company
Flex train schedule based on employee needs in advance
Car pool app
More work from home
Reduce physical space needs
Increase technology demands and budget
Changes in hours: different shifts, 4-10's
Uber
Use of real time apps ?? waze to direct to back roads/alternative routes and helps with commute
Allow for carpooling with Uber/Lyft for schedule changes
Telecommuting – reduces on-site traffic/parking
Currently allow staff members to telework within certain roles of company. Possibility of expanding this program in 2017.

Table 4: Aspiration, Question 1

If there were no financial constraints, what 2 transportation projects do you believe would be transformative for your company?
Slip ramp
Organized/on-demand ride share
Car pool lane on turnpike
Eastbound slip ramp from turnpike
4 th lane on turnpike
After hours SEPTA
Shuttle service for all buildings
Slip ramp
If no slip ramp/until built left hand turn from our complex to Camp Hill Road
More public transportation options
More ride sharing
Bus stop at each company
Shuttle from train to each complex
Slip ramp

Table 5: Aspiration Question 2

If there were no financial constraints, what do you believe would be transformative for the Office Park?
More/better local lunch options
Better signage within the park would be helpful for visitors/new hires
More bike trails especially on Virginia Drive
Food court
Basic amenities like dry cleaning, delivery and pick up
ATM machine
Mail box
UPS store
Additional restaurant/food options
Amenities and services
Restaurants, local businesses to run errands
More places for lunch
More lighting
Local shopping variety
More restaurants/amenities in walking distance
More restaurants within walking distance
Allowing residential developments to be in office park complex