

Transit facility making strides

But cost of Intermodal Center expected to top \$80m

BRIDGEPORT — It would cost more than double the 1996 estimate of \$35 million — and require about half the time it took to build the Great Pyramids in Egypt — but city officials hope to finally complete the Bridgeport Intermodal Center.

Stephen Tyliczcak, a Bridgeport senior economic development associate, said Friday the estimated cost for the center linking the city's ferry, train, bus and taxi services is more than \$80 million.

The plan is to build a new railroad station on the site of the current one and connect it via walkways paralleling Water Street to the ferry terminal to the south, about 600 feet away, and a new bus station to the north, about 1,000 feet away.

In 1996, when Congress first began allocating money for the project, the estimated cost was \$35 million.

Tyliczcak, who helped lead a walking tour of the proposed facility for U.S. Rep. Christopher Shays, R-4, and Federal Highway Administrator J. Richard Capka, said a new rail station could be built and open in three to five years.

That would mean, in a best-case scenario, the entire project could be completed by 2009, 13 years after it received the first funding.

In comparison, experts estimate it took less than 30 years to build the largest pyramid in Egypt, around 2600 B.C. That pyramid is 40 stories high and weighs an estimated 6.5 million tons.

On Friday, many commuters at the bus and rail stations said they weren't aware new stations were going to be built.

While Matthew Jonavason, a Trumbull resident, was saying he isn't very concerned about the station, Metro-North announced trains had been delayed.

"With these 25-minute delays, maybe they should fix the trains instead of the stations?" Jonavason said.

At the bus station, Bridgeport resident Gene Pettaway looked around and laughed when asked whether the city needs a new bus station.

Candace Carey, a Bridgeport resident, said the bus station is overcrowded and that additional room is needed to get more buses in and keep people moving, she said.

The Intermodal Center has been plagued by a number of problems, including difficulty in getting federal and state funds released in a timely manner, according to city officials.

The city had to take over the project in 1998 after the original administrator, the Greater Bridgeport Transit Authority, became embroiled in a controversy over how engineering contracts were awarded.

Within two years of taking over, the city built a 900-space parking garage at the Arena at Harbor Yard to provide parking for the center. A new contract has been awarded to expand parking to 1,400 spaces. The garage is about 2,000 feet south of the railroad station.

In 2001, the estimated cost rose to \$62 million, but in 2003 the city's estimates began fluctuating from \$40 million to \$50 million. In February 2003, Mayor John M. Fabrizi said he expected construction for the new bus station to begin by spring 2004.

Workers broke ground for the new bus station at Water Street and Stratford Avenue in April.

Standing under the elevated tracks of the Metro-North New Haven Line during Friday's tour, officials watched as workers operating excavators and bulldozers made progress on the new station, which will have 17 bus bays and a 10,000-square-foot building for passengers.

Fabrizi said Friday the new bus station should be completed within eight months; the city will tear down the old bus station, he said.

They then walked from the site under the tracks, crossed Stratford Avenue and climbed the stairs to the eastbound train station platform.

As the business-attired procession, complete with congressional interns carrying large renderings of future development, walked the platform, one woman seated on a bench said to another, "Oh, they're developing the area. Yes, yes, yes. Finally found the money."

After pausing to discuss the new rail station, officials then trooped down the stairs to the south and walked to the ferry terminal.

There, Shays and Capka announced the Bridgeport Port Authority will receive a \$2.2 million grant for a proposed high-speed ferry operation to New York.

Shays said none of the money will be spent if an economic feasibility study concludes the service can't be operated. But Shays said he expects the \$2.2 million will be used to expand that study and to cover initial plans for the service.

Fabrizi said the former Remington Shaver factory, more than 4,000 feet south of the rail station, is the favored location for a high-speed terminal. A private developer owns the site and plans to build condominiums there.

Capka seemed impressed with the plans for the center, especially after Tyliczcak and Fabrizi pointed out the new apartments being built nearby, with the hope those residents will flock to mass transit and stay off the highway.

Capka said the Bush administration has identified highway congestion as a nationwide problem and that centers like Bridgeport's are being watched closely.

"The things you've got going here are giving us insight to how we can manage congestion," Capka said.