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CITYSPACE

Terminal Hope



TRAINING DEALS: A revival of sorts has come to the area surrounding SEPTA's Frankford Transportation Center. Property values are rising and businesses are arriving. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

A year-old SEPTA station revitalizes Frankford.

by **Rebecca Bellville**

While many think of the area around SEPTA's Frankford Transportation Center as somewhere to pass through, others are turning it into a destination.

Last August, the \$188 million brick-and-glass structure on Frankford Avenue between Bridge and Pratt streets replaced an 80-year-old concrete terminal as part of a reconstruction effort of the entire rail line. It is one unlikely hope for revitalization in Frankford, a working-class neighborhood long known for decay and crime.

In the mid-1990s SEPTA planned to move the terminal to Bustleton Avenue, about a block north of its current location, so construction wouldn't disrupt the commute of the El and bus riders who use the station.

"The community got wind of this plan and had strong objections to it," says SEPTA's Cynthia Brey, who managed the project. "The merchants wanted to have more flow back and forth and thought that moving it to Bustleton would be a real blow."

Despite keeping the station in the same spot, SEPTA managed to keep it open during construction, except for a nine-day span last July when two blocks of train tracks were moved so they no longer shadowed Frankford Avenue.

The present design combines both ideas with the terminal in its old location and a 1,000-space parking garage on Bustleton, set to open by early 2006. It's a major improvement; one SEPTA spokesman, Gary Fairfax, says, "People used to walk under the structure and feel like something's going to fall." Tom Nuxoll, another SEPTA spokesman, says some riders purposely avoided the old terminal.

"They didn't want to smell the building. They didn't want to feel the building," he says. "Consequently, people treated the neighborhood that way."

Frankford was once a major shopping destination, but slipped into decline about 30 years ago. Steve Culbertson, executive director of the Frankford Community Development Corporation (FCDC), says about 40 percent of Frankford Avenue properties were vacant in 1987, compared with about 18 percent today. Nearby retail stores are typical of those found in chronically poor neighborhoods: check-cashing outfits and dollar stores. For as much as business leaders are trying to attract shoppers from outside the neighborhood, nearly all stores are closed by 6 p.m.

But locals say the new station has improved things. Culbertson says property values near the Frankford terminal have gone up, which bodes well for hopes that the building would lure business.

The station, which accommodates about 50,000 people daily, is expected to house a Dunkin' Donuts and flower and pretzel shops by summer's end. A neighboring parcel used as a construction staging area will be offered for development once the terminal is complete, Brey says.

The safer, cleaner station has helped lure new businesses and local artists seeking cheap studio space. The area around the terminal, and the next few blocks down Frankford Avenue toward Center City, is becoming a haven for artists. For this, Martha Kearns, executive director of community-arts group FrankfordStyle, credits Kevin Phelan, a Philadelphia native who started a Frankford Avenue gallery called The Art Place about six years ago. That spurred at least six art-related businesses to move nearby in the last five years, Kearns says. Phelan is gone now, but a new owner plans to reopen his gallery, she says.

Jim McCarthy, president of the Mantis Development Corp., also hopes to cash in. He was partially inspired three years ago after talking to merchants at the Frankford Arts Festival, a May event that has been around for five years with the goal of drawing people to the neighborhood. One quarter of last year's 2,500 attendees came from outside of Frankford, according to the FCDC.



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garet-Orthodox El station into apartments, studios and display space to the building, which should be ready by October. He says the lofts of the cost. "We're not in Old City, we're not in the loft district, so we

Cheap real estate is one draw — McCarthy got the building for \$50,000. A blighted building across the street, which McCarthy says should be a coffee shop by next spring, went for \$35,000.

McCarthy is also helping Joan Oliveto open a restaurant in a nearby building that used to house drug addicts and prostitutes. Oliveto's restaurant, Mozaic, should open by this winter. It will serve Thai, Italian and French food, double as an art gallery and be a jazz cafe on the weekends.

"I want the people of the community to have a restaurant where they can go to and feel special," Oliveto says.



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