Questions raised about freight hub plans

Maurice O'Connell of CSX Corp. discusses plans last night for the rail yard on Franklin Street. (T&G Staff/STEVE LANAVA)

By Nick Kotsopoulos TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
Expansion of the CSX rail yard on Franklin Street has neighbors concerned about potential traffic problems. (T&G Staff/STEVE LANAVA)

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-- PHILIP P. PALMIERI, DISTRICT 2 COUNCILOR

WORCESTER — Residents in the area of the CSX Corp. freight yard on Franklin Street made it clear last night they are not looking to fight the company's plans to more than double the size of its facility, but they emphasized they want to have some say in those plans to mitigate potential negative impacts to their neighborhood.

In particular, the biggest concerns they raised were with the planned closing of Putnam Lane, which connects Franklin Street to Shrewsbury Street, and the construction of a freight yard maintenance building at the end of Atlanta Street.

Residents contend those two actions would put more traffic on Plantation Street, which already has traffic issues of its own.

"This is a great project for the city and I hope it happens, but it is not a very good project for the neighborhood it will impact," said Joseph Capone, a property owner on Franklin Street. "The closing of Putnam Lane will have a major impact to our neighborhood and the construction of the maintenance building will put a lot more vehicles on Atlanta Street, which is strictly a residential neighborhood."

More than 50 people, including eight of the 11 city councilors, attended last night's public hearing on the CSX plans, held by the City Council Public Works and Public Service and Transportation committees.

The $100 million project is part of a private-public partnership between the state and CSX to reposition its freight operations in Massachusetts, so the rail line between Worcester and Boston can be opened to more commuter trains, with a goal of adding 20 more commuter trains between Worcester and Boston by 2012, according to Jamey L. Tesler of the state Department of Transportation.

CSX has long operated a freight yard in the Franklin Street area, just east of Interstate 290. About 400 trucks per day enter and exit the 23-acre facility. But because CSX will be moving its main freight operations out of its Beacon Park yards in the Allston section of Boston, the company needs to reposition its freight activity at existing rail yards it has in Central and Western Massachusetts.

Maurice O'Connell, vice president of government affairs for CSX, said yesterday the company wants to expand its freight facility in Worcester by another 28 acres, boosting it to 51 acres, making the city its new freight hub for New England.

District 2 Councilor Philip P. Palmieri, whose district includes the freight yard, said no project in recent memory is as important as this one. He said he hopes it can be completed in a way that makes everyone happy.
But he pointed out that the proposed closing of Putnam Lane is a “very big issue.” With its closing, he said, there will no longer be any roadway connection between Franklin and Shrewsbury streets, from Union Station to Piccadilly Plaza on Shrewsbury Street.

“We want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem,” Mr. Palmieri said. “We can't afford to miss this opportunity for the city; this has to happen. But there are several issues, like the closing of Putnam Lane, that will have to be worked out.”

Mr. O'Connell said the closing of Putnam Lane is necessary so there can be additional track capacity to handle the freight and commuter rail traffic coming into the terminal.

“If we're not able to build the additional capacity we need, the terminal doesn't work and that would affect the number of commuter trains that could run,” he said.

But Leonard Ciuffredo, president of the Brown Square Neighborhood Crime Watch, said the closure of Putnam Lane would create another unwelcome “roadblock” in the East Side of the city.

“I support the project in general because it will create much-needed jobs,” Mr. Ciuffredo said. “It would also be a better use than what exists there now. But we don't want any more roadblocks on the East Side. We'd like to see Putnam Lane kept open. We want to work with you to keep that open.”

Because the entrance/exit of the freight yard would be shifted from Franklin Street to Grafton Street, some residents of that area wanted assurances that trucks exiting the yard would only be allowed to take a right turn so they could access Interstate 290 and not be allowed to take a left turn and travel on local streets.

CSX officials said they would be willing to go along with such a restriction.

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