



Editorial: Resetting the clock at Springfield's Union Station

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By **The Republican Editorials**



File photo/The Republican

The interior of Union Station in Springfield.

The once-grand 1920s-era Union Station with its cavernous ceilings and soaring arches has stood like a ghost of Springfield's past since it closed as a railroad station in 1973.

Over the last three decades ideas for the renovation of the brick train station – one plan included a luxury hotel and an IMAX theater – have been stalled by a tangle of legal problems and an economy that couldn't sustain such grand visions for its reuse.

But thanks to the persistence of leaders like U.S. Rep. Richard E. Neal, D-Springfield, a revitalization plan – albeit, one with a less grandiose concept than originally conceived – **is back on track.**

To put the good news in perspective, the future of the station was a hot topic when Neal was mayor of Springfield from 1984 to 1989.

The Federal Transit Administration has lifted a freeze on funding for the Union Station project, ruling that the Springfield Redevelopment Authority has satisfied requirements to become the “direct recipient” of grant money. The project includes federal, state and private funding.

“I think it signals the re-set for Union Station,” Neal said. “We have been assured by the Department of Transportation that once the forms are filled out, this gets the project back on target.”

Springfield Mayor Domenic J. Sarno praised the Federal Transit Administration's decision, noting that it sets the stage for remaking Union Station as “a regional hub not just for transportation but for economic development.” Sarno said the green light for the project comes at a good time as the city continues to advocate for high-speed, inter-city and regional rail service.

The \$71 million Union Station project will provide space for the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority, Amtrak (which now operates a small station on the Lyman Street), commuter rail and inter-city bus operations, along with transit-related office space. The baggage building will be torn down and replaced by a new bus terminal and parking deck.

The transit administration froze approximately \$38 million in federal funding for the Union Station project after a 2005 audit showed questionable spending by the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority under its former administrator, Gary A. Shepard. Shepard was fired by the authority in 2006 and later hired to run the Berkshire Transit Authority, and is suing the PVTA for lost wages and damages. A recent review by the administration praised the PVTA and its new administrator Mary L. MacInnes, for a "remarkable turnaround."

The Springfield Redevelopment Authority acquired the station by eminent domain in 1989 following a legal dispute involving a New York City businessman David Buntzman, who bought the building in 1969 from Penn Central. The SRA will advertise for a project manager and will subsequently hire an architect to come up with a design for an intermodal transportation center.

With the Union Station project now gathering steam, the outlook for downtown Springfield is looking up. A revitalized train station would provide a boost to the north blocks of downtown and serve as an attractive bookend to the extensive renovations on the State Street Corridor sparked by the new \$63 million federal courthouse and renovations now under way in the South End. This summer there was more good news for the State Street area when construction was begun for a \$110 million state data center on the site of the old Technical High School.

One of the last times the old station saw any action was in 1997 when the city cleaned up the space so that basketball star Rebecca Lobo and players for the fledgling Women's National Basketball Association could film a 20-second promotional spot in the old station.

Now it's time to dust off the cobwebs and uncover the old terrazzo floors for good.

We look forward to a bustling Union Station – with coffee shops, newsstands and retail stores and people on the move – to complete the a downtown renaissance. The old railroad station has been ghost-like for too long.

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