

Data unit argues for transit stops

By EILEEN STILWELL • Courier-Post Staff • May 1, 2010

CAMDEN — When a coalition of Camden residents looked at the proposed expansion of the PATCO Hi-Speedline deep into Gloucester County, they suspected Camden might not be getting its fair share of new stops.

They asked CamConnect, a nonprofit organization that analyzes data, to plot usage of the rail line by city residents and proximity to stations.

In eye-popping maps and graphs, CamConnect demonstrated that city residents are underserved even though 30 percent of the line's rides either begin or end in Camden.

Mass transit is critical to city residents because 84 percent of those employed work outside the city.

"That data will be the coalition's scaffolding in presenting its argument to the Delaware River Port Authority to create three additional stops in Camden, instead of two," said CamConnect Executive Director Stephen Singer.

About 75 people attended CamConnect's Data Fair Friday at Rutgers in Camden to learn more about the organization and some of its useful but obscure findings. Using available demographic information from a variety of sources, CamConnect has demonstrated that Camden is underserved by banks, has insufficient park space and only one-third of its households have high-speed Internet.



Jeremy Young of Habitat for Humanity visits a booth at the CamConnect Data Fair at Rutgers-Camden Friday. (JOHN ZIOMEK/Courier-Post)

Created 10 years ago, CamConnect is funded by private grants and membership dues. It also analyzes data on a fee-for-service basis for private clients and nonmembers.

Data alone can be deadly, but when harnessed for deep civic engagement, it can be powerful, said Singer.

"Just having the data isn't enough," said Singer citing a pre-Hurricane Katrina federal report that predicted disaster if the levees were not better maintained.

Rutgers professor Andrew Seligsohn compared the value of fine-tuned, quantitative data to a global positioning system.

"You can't get to where you want to go if you don't know where you are. Data is a starting point. It can help move us from the world as it is to the world that it should be," Seligsohn said.

New to Camden, Seligsohn said old data is equally important.

"Knowing that Camden had 150,000 jobs 50 years ago and 30,000 today tells me something about the loss and what was once possible," Seligsohn said.

Seligsohn applauds all companies and agencies that collect data, from hospital outcomes to the number of high school dropouts in a given city.

Not all cities, he said, are fortunate enough to have a private organization like CamConnect.

"Data should not be corked and cellared like fine wine. It should emanate from trustworthy sources and be available to everyone," he said.

Seligsohn also made a pitch for literacy.

People who can't understand a graph, pie chart or other representations of quantitative data are unable to follow arguments about health care, climate change or other issues of public life.

"If you are cut out of those abilities, you can't understand or participate fully in the world in which you live," he said.

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ON THE WEB

For more information, visit www.camconnect.org.