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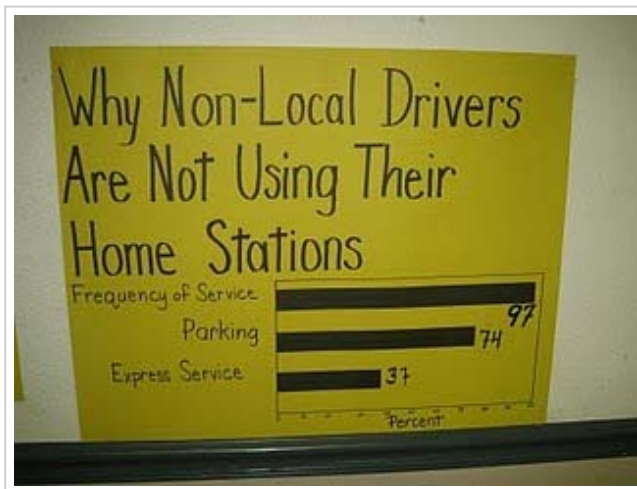
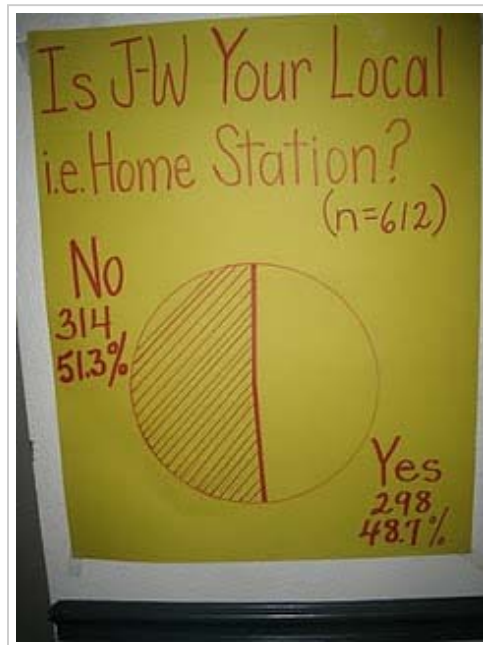
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RAPPOPORT'S RULES OF DISORDER

ANN L. RAPPOPORT, PH.D. PROVIDES HER SOMETIMES SASSY, SOMETIMES SOBER SCOOP ON THE ABINGTON- CHELTENHAM-JENKINTOWN SCENE. RAPPOPORT'S BLOG COVERS ANYTHING COMPELLINGLY HYPER-LOCAL - FROM TOWNSHIP ISSUES TO THE LOWER MERION WEB CAM CONTROVERSY.

MONDAY, APRIL 12, 2010

Free Coffee: Railroadng the Region



The *Free Coffee Program* story goes something like this: A favorite public authority is providing free

Starbucks coffee each morning at one of its buildings to attract participation to its services. Each cup of coffee loses money

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for the agency, but hey, taxpayers are subsidizing it, so it doesn't need to make sense.

No big duh, our favorite public agency runs short on coffee many weekday mornings during the winter months. Eureka! The agency concludes that there's so much demand for its services at that building, it needs to serve more coffee there. Equating the desire for free coffee with public demand for its services, the agency seeks \$27 million to expand its "successful" *Free Coffee Program*. Now the authority loses \$29 per cup.

You suspect a flaw in the reasoning here?

Yep, here's the thing: the folks coming to get the coffee are already Starbucks drinkers, coming to save money and get their kicks from a "free" good. They're not new to the agency services. They're just driving to the new location because that's where there's convenient coffee on tap. There's nothing inherent to the "free coffee program" that improves the overall utilization of the agency's services, only *where* the users show up in order to get coffee.

That was part of the analogy provided by Microsoft computer scientist Ernie Cohen Wednesday evening April 7 in a public meeting at Calvary Presbyterian Church of Wyncote explaining the absurdity of SEPTA's plan for a 4 or 5-story garage at the historic Jenkintown-Wyncote train station. SEPTA's plan to add parking doesn't woo new riders but rather gives current riders additional incentive to drive extra distances beyond their local stations, according to a number of speakers.

Ernie Cohen offers \$300 bounty to the person who can find a professional economist willing to stand up to the public and explain for the record how the proposed parking garage makes economic sense.

In the interest of full disclosure, I also oppose the garage. There are lots of solid reasons. These reasons are rooted in what's good for regional transit and what's good for the region's environment.

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RAPPOPORT'S RULES
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Evidence demonstrates that over 50 percent of the current parkers at Jenkintown-Wyncote station have leapfrogged SEPTA rail stations closer to their homes to drive to JW. How does that contribute to walkable, sustainable communities? How does that reduce carbon fuel emissions, auto time and traffic? How does that promote new riders on public transit?

Why do hundreds of SEPTA riders skip over their local stations and drive to Jenkintown-Wyncote station?

SEPTA data reveal that those drivers skipping over their local stations to drive to Jenkintown-Wyncote overwhelmingly would prefer more frequent rail service and more parking at stations closer to their homes. Montgomery County Commissioner and candidate for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination, Joe Hoeffel, was the featured guest at this meeting and *he admitted to being one of the hundreds of more distant drivers to JW for those very reasons.* So why then does SEPTA prefer to frame this as a parking problem for Jenkintown-Wyncote, rather than as a service and parking problem at the relevant other stations? Why survey the public only to ignore their very clear messages?

A number of residents at the April 7 meeting expressed concerns about SEPTA's use of 20th century thinking to try to solve 21st century problems.

Why accept as "given" or permanent a rail line infrastructure that dates back over 100 years, even though the demographics have changed so dramatically in that time? If the trunk lines are inadequate to meet the needs of riders, build where the riders are and where they need to go. Create spurs, reinstitute the R8 to Newtown, utilize dormant rails where they are and add rails where the beds are wide enough, use right of way, etc. SEPTA is supposed to have expertise at this, not the taxpayers who fund this massive organization.

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->**Why not revise rail – as we have done with roads – to follow the people and jobs?** If SEPTA has bottlenecks, fix them. Don't throw money at false fixes and pretend those are substitutes. As the taxpayers said, "This is a service problem, not a parking problem."

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->**Why spend precious transit dollars on projects that diametrically counter environmental principles and responsibility?** Even the EPA's Smart Growth principles include "walkable neighborhoods" and "transportation choices." But SEPTA prohibits meaningful public transit choice when its inadequate service requires riders to drive to stations beyond those closer to their homes and work.

Taxpayers have researched and suggested to their political representatives and to SEPTA numerous measures to improve transit service, reduce auto emissions, contribute to stronger, sustainable communities and relieve the parking dilemmas that concern some drivers during peak winter morning commuting hours. Alternatives to the proposed garage would bring vitality to the region's neighborhoods, improve the environment, contribute to long-term fiscal responsibility and support public transit.

Doesn't that beat continually paying \$29 per cup for "free" coffee?

Study the issue yourself:

<http://www.septa.org/construction/jenk-park.html>

<http://www.septa.org/construction/pdf/jenk-park-needs-2009-12-11.pdf>

<http://www.cheltenhamchamberofcitizens.org>

<http://www.r8newtown.com/>

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