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Rep. Moulton amps up pressure on governor to study North-South rail link

Congressman Seth Moulton has attracted a lot of attention of late as a vocal critic of President Donald Trump, yet the freshman Democrat has been aiming barbs at a much more moderate Republican — Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker — in an attempt to raise the profile of what Moulton calls “the most transformative construction project being considered right now in Massachusetts.”

That project is the long-touted proposal to build an underground rail connection between Boston’s North Station and South Station, an effort that has not gained serious traction in the more than a decade since it was proposed — until recently. Despite his focus on transportation, Gov. Charlie Baker has yet to endorse it, for example. But the Salem congressman has been part of a renewed push in recent months that coincides with progress on another project that would arguably make it tougher to complete the North-South Rail Project, one that does have Baker’s support: a \$1.6 billion plan to expand South Station.

Moulton calls Baker’s embrace of the South Station Expansion project “incredibly short-sighted.” “The question is, does Boston want to be a 21st century city with a connected, fast express transit network, or do we want to have a very 19th century solution to a 21st century transportation problem?” Moulton said in an interview last week. “Unfortunately, the governor is advocating that 19th century solution.”

Right now, commuters from the North Shore seeking a transportation connection to South Station must transfer twice on the MBTA, and those entering South Station must likewise transfer from the Red Line to the Orange Line at Downtown Crossing to reach North Station, before transferring to a commuter rail line there.

The state is set to conduct a study in the coming months of the costs, benefits and viability of a North-South Rail Project, which was authorized nearly three years ago by former Gov. Deval Patrick.

A request for bids for that study are slated to go out March 1, according to the project's advocates, who have been working behind the scenes to ensure that the scope of the study is wide enough to show all the advantages they see. Those benefits include a much faster, more reliable transit system overall; a vastly easier commute from north of the city to anywhere south or vice versa; fewer cars on the road; and more valuable land in downtown Boston available for development.

A race against time

The study is in a race, of a sort, with the South Station expansion project, whose study phase is already under way — and few officials see both projects getting a green light.

Moulton and other supporters of the North-South rail link contend that rather than building out so-called “stub-end terminals” like both North and South stations — which require trains to stop and turn around at a central hub, taking up more space than an end-to-end track — cities across the globe are connecting train stations that were built on their outskirts. For instance, a 2.8 mile tunnel in Zurich, Switzerland, for instance, completed in 2015, is the same length as Boston's proposal. It cost \$2.1 billion.

Baker, meanwhile, hasn't exactly come out against the North-South Rail Project, but he has been lukewarm to the idea so far. Contacted for comment, a Baker spokesman referred questions to the state Department of Transportation. Jacquelyn Goddard, communications director for MassDOT, said that while Baker's administration “is focused on improving service for the 1 million riders who rely on the MBTA's core system every day by upgrading existing infrastructure, we appreciate the input of proponents as the Department of Transportation conducts a feasibility reassessment of the North and South Stations rail link.”

Other advocates of the South Station Expansion say they aren't opposed to the North-South link, either — they just don't want consideration of it to delay the work at South Station. That project seeks to build more tracks and use extra land for rail yards to store trains when not in use, and its supporters say it's needed to address the scheduling problems now plaguing the station.

Rick Dimino, president and CEO of the Boston nonprofit A Better City, said he doesn't see the two projects as mutually exclusive. The current plans for South Station expansion, he said, fit well with plans for the South Boston Waterfront, as well as development plans for the Back Bay and the Financial District, that go beyond simply expanding the number of tracks. And one benefit can't be ignored, he argues: That it already has an approved environmental plan, meaning work could start soon.

Dimino says his group hasn't taken a position on the North-South Link, but he questions its benefits. Simply connecting North and South stations, he argues, could be done more cheaply using water transportation. Also, he doesn't believe Massachusetts should bear the whole cost of the project, which would ultimately benefit the entire Eastern Seaboard.

"I think you've got to pull out the local benefit from the regional benefit," he said. "Are we building a tunnel for a real demand or some perceived demand? ... We think there's a lot more homework that needs to be done."

Business impact, public proponents

The North-South Link has big implications for the business community. Brad Bellows, an architect who has advocated the North South Rail Project since the 1990s, said the inability of workers to easily commute between the North and South sides of the city is one of the most common complaints from industry.

"When we talk to business groups, transportation is just critical to every business in the commonwealth — the congestion and the inadequacy of the system as it now stands," he said.

"And we know the governor and the secretary (of the Department of Transportation) are committed to making improvements. Our goal is just to prioritize this as one of the key projects."

Key proponents of the project now include not only Moulton, but former governors Michael Dukakis and William Weld, a majority of Boston's city councilors, and several key legislators — in total more than 110 public figures, according to Norman Gorin, chairman of the North South Rail Link Steering Committee. Many of those are listed on the organization's website.

Gorin says that for the past few months, the group's efforts have been focused on discussions with the state DOT about the scope of the project. As of last week, he said, the group believed the state had been aiming to put out a request for proposals for the \$2 million study by March 1, and he intends to make sure that "a few things that aren't in (the state's) traditional line of analysis" for transportation projects are a part of that study.

"We're making a lot of headway," he said regarding the steering committee's negotiations with Mass DOT. "There are still a few points we're discussing. Our position is, garbage in, garbage out."

While Gorin declined to say exactly what aspects his group wants included in the study, he said none of them would require a significant increase in the cost of the study.

But members of the steering committee know one major hurdle is the perception that the project could turn into another Big Dig, which was pitched as costing \$2.4 billion, but which ended up

costing well over \$14 billion. A presentation by the steering committee addresses that concern head-on, arguing that the massive cost overruns for which the Big Dig became infamous came from its reliance on old technology and the disruption of ground transportation all over the city, including tunnels, bridges and more. Today, they argue, newer automated tunnel-boring machines make that method obsolete and have allowed similar projects in dozens of cities to be completed on time and within budget.

“The way to characterize the difference between the two projects are open heart surgery and laparoscopic surgery,” said Bellows. “The Big Dig was done in a totally different method, which is intrinsically costly ... this is just at the portals you dig down, and the rest is all done underground.”

Clock is ticking

Proponents of the rail link say there’s still time to change public perception — and the mind of Gov. Baker — before work on the South Station Expansion begins, but time is running out. A study of the expansion project is expected to be done by June, while the one for the rail link will likely take at least eight months.

Moulton contends that even if the cost of a rail link ends up being more than the expansion, if you take into account all the land in downtown Boston that would be made available for redevelopment without the expansion, “you actually see that expanding South Station is a more expensive project than doing the rail link.” The land in question consists of two plots — the Post Office on the Fan Pier and Widett Circle — which together would be worth more than \$10 billion. Considering President Trump’s stated interest in funding infrastructure projects, Moulton says it’s possible this project may get federal support as well (as of yet, neither the North-South link nor the South Station Expansion have been proposed for federal funding).

But for him, the opportunity cost of not doing the project is the highest price to pay.

“Boston would really be on the wrong side of history to be expanding South Station when we have the opportunity to do this rail link,” he said.
