

Congressman Moulton urges business leaders to support North-South Rail Link

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Rep. Seth Moulton is doing the rounds of the state's business leaders, hitting up the Urban Land Institute on Wednesday and the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce on Thursday. And while there are easily a dozen or so pressing topics that the Salem congressman could focus on in those talks, he's choosing to urge support for a project that rarely makes headlines recently: the North-South Rail Link.

A vocal proponent of the idea for more than a year, Moulton is positioning his support as not simply an idea to transform Boston into a truly world-class city, but as way of promoting economic equality. He cites a recent Harvard University study that finds that commuting time, and not education, is the single biggest factor in helping people escape poverty. "The longer an average commute in a given county, the worse the chances of low-income families there of moving up the ladder," he told more than 120 attendees Thursday afternoon to the chamber's Government Affairs Forum.

The link — which would entail a 2.7 mile tunnel between North and South stations — is thought of by supporters as a way to not just cut the time it takes to travel between the city's two main transportation hubs from about a half hour to around two minutes. They argue it would also allow for better train schedules overall, connect employers on the North Shore with workers on the South shore and vice versa, and significantly ease traffic around the city as a whole. While no formal studies of the project have been done, based on other similar projects around the world and doubling the estimates "because this is Boston," Moulton is throwing out the ballpark figure of between \$4 billion and \$5 billion.

The state is now weighing the pros and cons of four respondents to a request for bids to conduct a \$2 million study of the idea, with plans to make a decision next month, according to MBTA spokesman Joe Pesaturo. The study itself is estimated to take about eight months.

At the chamber, Moulton gave at least two good reasons why he's focusing the bulk of his efforts on convincing business leaders to back the idea. One is to perk up the ears of potential investors in the project — an effort he says he's already seen in presentations.

“I think that there is real economic interest in this from folks outside, as investors,” he said. “I think that there will be a lot more interest from the investor community once more of the business community is on board.”

But the second reason has to do with the state’s top politician, and arguably the biggest obstacle the idea has to taking root in the state: Gov. Charlie Baker, who favors a \$1.6 billion plan to expand South Station. While some state politicians contend that both projects could feasibly be done, Moulton and others argue that the North-South Rail Link would eliminate the need for the expansion project. They also worry that if the South Station Expansion project — which is farther along than the link project — proceeds as planned, there won’t be money nor political capital left over for the link project.

Moulton has had some harsh criticism of Baker’s stance in the past. But before the chamber audience, he took a softer tone toward the fiscally-conservative Republican.

“One of the reasons why it’s so important to get more business leaders behind the project — and we already have quite a good number — but the reason why I wanted to speak to you is one of the things I respect about Gov. Baker is he listens to the business community. And he makes business-based decisions,” said Moulton.

It’s hard to gauge how Moulton’s entreaties are being received in the business communities, and he acknowledges the state is still contending with “a hangover from the Big Dig” — a project that ballooned from its \$2 billion estimates to more than \$15 billion by the time it was finished in 2007. But he appeared to have at least one supporter in the audience Thursday — an employee of Bank of America who said he just moved to the state in January.

“I actually decided to live in your district (on the North Shore),” the man told Moulton in questions after his talk. “But because I work on the South Shore, it would take so long to get from the North to the South Shore, so I decided to live on the South Shore.”

As the man spoke, Moulton chimed in to say, “I swear this was not a plant.”