

BOSTON
BUSINESS JOURNAL

<http://www.bizjournals.com/boston/news/2017/04/28/sound-the-whistle-a-renewed-call-to-connect.html>

Sound the whistle: A renewed call to link Boston's two main rail stations

April 28, 2017 - by Don Seiffert, Managing Editor

Earlier this month, Congressman [Seth Moulton](#) stood before a crowd of more than 100 of the area's top business leaders and delivered a speech loaded with terms such as "locomotive dwell time" and "stub-end terminals."

That the Salem Democrat could give a talk more suited to a meeting of transportation engineers comes as no surprise to those who know his background (he's a former managing director of the Texas Central Railway). But the level of interest in the intricacies of the topic was surprising: The crowd, mostly members of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, had a number of questions about what would be one of the biggest public-works projects proposed in Massachusetts since the Big Dig: the North-South Rail Link.



Former Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, shown at Boston's South Station.

W. Marc Bernsau

Long championed by some, dismissed by others as a pipe dream, the idea to connect Boston's two main rail stations with a 2.8-mile tunnel has been around in some form for more than a century. Current proponents — Democrats, Republicans, politicians and business leaders — see it as a crucial fix to not only an aging public transit system, but also the region's worsening traffic problems.

Backers argue that it's about more than cutting travel time between North and South stations

from 30 minutes to about two. It would broaden the employee base of businesses south of the city — including South Boston’s growing Innovation District — by making it possible for employees to commute there from the north of Boston. And vice-versa for commuters from south of the city trying to work in the city’s northern neighborhoods. It would pave the way for faster, more frequent commuter rail trains from Framingham and Worcester, help fix many of the scheduling and financial problems the MBTA faces today, and connect our city with the entire eastern seaboard, proponents contend.

But against the multitude of arguments made in favor of the idea, there is one overriding reason the project has been blocked for decades: money.

No cost estimates of the project based on modern tunnel-boring methods exist, although a study set to begin next month is aimed at providing that by early 2018. In the meantime, Moulton is tossing out a ballpark estimate of around \$5 billion in his recent talks.

All about the Benjamins

“People want to know how much it’s going to cost. That’s not an unreasonable request,” said former Gov. [Michael Dukakis](#), one of the project’s most outspoken supporters, in a recent interview. It was Dukakis who first included the idea as part of the original Big Dig project, then was forced to take it out in order to get the Reagan Administration to help fund it. Those cost estimates on the project from the 1980s don’t apply now, because tunnel-construction methods have changed significantly.

Rail link advocates — including Dukakis and Moulton, as well as former Gov. Bill Weld, two dozen mayors and most of Boston’s city councillors — acknowledge that it’s largely the cost overruns from the Big Dig that make many people, including Gov. Charlie Baker, unwilling to embrace the idea of another multibillion-dollar tunnel project in the city. Baker has agreed to spend \$2 million on the study, but publicly has endorsed a plan to expand South Station — which many consider a competitor project politically and financially.

“Part of this is convincing the guy in the governor’s office to take this thing seriously,” Dukakis said. “I think we’re making some progress here. But obviously Charlie’s an important guy. We’ve got to convince him that this is something he should do. I hope the study itself will do this.”

In response to a request for comment, Jacquelyn Goddard, communications director for the state’s Department of Transportation, emailed a response that indicates the state is heeding one of the most common objections to the link project: namely, shouldn’t the cash-strapped MBTA just focus on fixing what it already has?

“While the Baker-Polito Administration is focused on improving service for the one 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,” Goddard wrote.

Moulton argues that it’s the wrong approach. Cities all over the world — at least 35 identified by rail-link proponents — have dealt with the same issue Boston now faces, disconnected train stations on their outskirts that required modern tunnel-boring techniques to connect them.

“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,” said Moulton in a recent Business Journal interview. “Unfortunately, the governor is advocating that 19th century solution.”

Real or perceived demand?

Rick Dimino, president and CEO of the Boston nonprofit A Better City — a group that supports the South Station expansion — believes both projects could be done. He questions some aspects of the rail link project, however, and says he’s waiting for more study of the project. Simply connecting North and South stations, he said, could be done more cheaply using a water ferry or bus — both ideas that have recently been proposed. He also doesn’t believe Massachusetts should pay for the whole rail link project, since it would ultimately benefit the whole 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.”

The study set to begin next month will assess the potential increase in train usage that could result from the project, although supporters already say that those ridership estimates may be too low because they won’t take into account an upgrade to modern trains that are faster and allow fewer cars to run more frequently.

But Dukakis, the eternal political optimist, remains confident that the benefits of the project will eventually win out.

“If you talk to people in the business, they’ll say to you this is a no-brainer. There shouldn’t be any debate about this,” he said. “If (we) are serious about a bright, expansive future with all that you want, this thing ought to be the single most important transportation construction project (we) get into.”