

BOSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Most Mass. congresspeople now on board with North South Rail Link

Jun 9, 2017, 12:05pm EDT
Industries & Tags

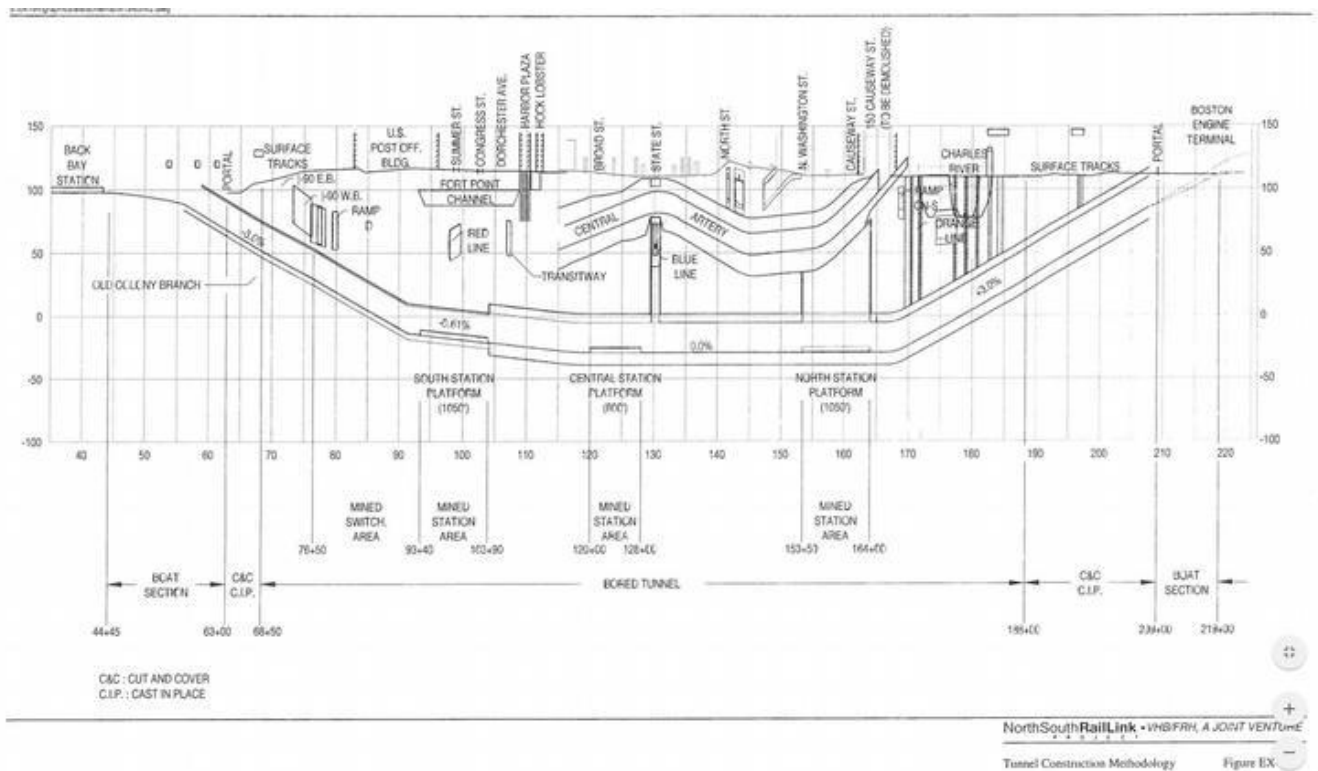


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The most recent (although somewhat outdated) plan for the North South Rail Project.

Courtesy of Citizens for North South Rail Project

Ahead of the 2018 Massachusetts governor campaign, growing support for the massive transportation project among Democrats could make it into an issue for Gov. Charlie Baker.

As the state's Democratic Party for the first time endorsed a decades-old plan to build a tunnel connecting North and South stations, a majority of the state's members of Congress have now also thrown their support behind the idea in recent weeks. The growing support for the project comes as the state prepares to award a \$2 million contract in coming days to study the proposal, touted by supporters as vital for commuters and businesses in the greater Boston area to allow for growth in coming years. The study, expected to take about eight months to complete, will be the first attempt at a cost benefit analysis of the project since the project was cut from the original Central Artery project back in the 1980s.

This past weekend at the convention of the Massachusetts Democratic Party in Worcester, members adopted a platform that includes "the construction of the North-South Rail Link to unify north-side and south-side commuter rail systems and to extend the Northeast Corridor." John Businger, a longtime supporter of the rail link and a member of the state Democratic committee's platform committee, said that it's the first time that the idea has been part of the state party's official platform, and a spokesman for the committee also confirmed to the Business Journal that the inclusion of the project is a first.

The idea has notably not been endorsed by Gov. Charlie Baker. The Baker administration, as reported previously in the Business Journal, has said that while it "appreciate(s) the input of proponents" of the rail link project, it is "focused on improving service for the one million riders who rely on the MBTA's core system every day by upgrading existing infrastructure."

The inclusion of the rail link proposal in the state's party platform could make it an issue in Baker's reelection campaign. At least one of Baker's opponents for the 2018 race, Newton Mayor Setti Warren, has said he supports the project, and others may follow suit. Beyond that, Businger said "it remains to be seen" how the project's inclusion in the platform will help advance the idea. "It will help, along with a lot of other things," Businger said.

One of those "other things" supporters are working toward is getting some of the state's most prominent politicians to publicly back the plan. To that end, two of the state's nine members of the House of Representatives gave that support in the past two weeks, according to Businger. The Business Journal has confirmed that Democratic representatives Richard Neal of Springfield and James McGovern of Worcester have both recently signed onto the so-called North South Rail Link Working Group, a loose coalition of politicians who have said they support the project. Neal and McGovern join three colleagues in the House — Seth Moulton of Salem, Katherine Clark of Cambridge and Niki Tsongas of Lowell — in publicly supporting the proposal. Along with the support of Sen. Ed Markey, advocates can now claim six of the 11 members of the state's Congressional delegation are now officially on board.

The levels of support among local congresspeople, however, vary widely. Moulton has recently been out speaking specifically on the issue, calling the governor's support of a less expensive, but more limited plan to address congestion at South Station "incredibly short-sighted." On the other hand, a spokesman for Neal, when contacted by the Business Journal, said that while Neal has indeed signed onto the NSRL working group, he supports "investing more in our regional rail infrastructure" in general, and his main transit priority remains the construction of a high-speed rail connection between Springfield and Boston.

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