

Meeting Report

Unified Rail System for the 21st Century: A Presentation on the North-South Rail Link

April 12, 2016 - 7:00 PM

Acton Town Hall - Faulkner Hearing Room

Featured Speakers: Governor Michael Dukakis and Architect Brad Bellows

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The North-South Rail Link is a proposal to modernize and unify the rail systems serving the Greater Boston area. The presentation provided a clear glimpse of enviable modernized rail systems world wide along with an understanding of various types of trains and trams, with lines blurring between the two. According to Governor Dukakis, who gave a detailed presentation and historical account, the unification of what is essentially two rail systems now serving the area would provide over 100M a year in savings due to current inefficiencies.

The plan would also greatly improve mobility in the area by closing the one mile gap. This would allow employers to fully tap into labor resources that are currently divided due to commuting difficulties, thereby driving up labor costs and undercutting competitiveness, according to Cambridge Architect, Brad Bellows. An estimated 500 tons of carbon emissions per day would be eliminated by improving cross-transit and enabling commuters to efficiently take public transit rather than driving.

To date, 145 legislators have endorsed the proposal that seeks to replace the current plan to expand South Station that has proven neither an effective or financially advantageous solution. Governor Dukakis stated that “no one is expanding stub end stations...as the DOT wants to do,” and he provided details about the poor financial and transportation outcomes of the current plan to expand South Station. Governor Dukakis has a long history of involvement with the study of rail transportation and served a five-year term on the Amtrak Board as Vice-Chairman from 1998-2003.

Urgency is needed in order to keep the plan viable. Most urgently, a 40-story tower development over South Station (need more detail here), if approved, would have a footprint that would block construction of the proposed plan. Furthermore, the precious window of current low interest rates provides an opportunity for low cost financing. The public sentiment is a concern given the huge cost overruns of the big dig, but the plan is seen as being very cost effective due to efficient tunneling technology.

This plan is seen as a much better investment than the current South Station expansion plan and a necessary step to bringing 21st Century rail services to the Greater Boston Metropolitan area. Setti Warren, the Mayor of the City of Newton, who was also present, is working to bring Mayors on board with the plan. Citizen support is vital to gain traction for this proposal.